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The Reclamation of Japanese National Identity in Product design.

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Introduction

Today's Japan is a country renowned internationally for it's outstanding ability to create state of the art consumer electronics. This, however, was not always the case. The primary objective of the following chapters is to highlight the way in which Japan regained its national identity in product design through a process of globalisation. The Sony Corporation will be exemplified to place further emphasis on Japans rise to prominence in the international market of consumer electronics products.

The first chapter discusses Japans loss of national identity in the period following World war two. Japan was forced into creating products which had a global appeal in order that it would catch up economically with the West. Given that American occupational forces occupied Japan in the years proceeding the war, and that the general perception of America was one of luxury and affluence, this was the obvious lead to follow. The tendency to create products with a global appeal was encouraged by government incentives.

In chapter two, the importance of corporate identity and company image as well as national image is clarified, and the reasons why Sony stands out as an innovator for global Japanese products are brought to light.

Continuing to use the Sony Corporation as an example, chapter three discusses the changing international perception of Japanese manufactured goods from cheap imitations to innovations. A number of reasons for this

changeover are mentioned and analysed, including the creation of completely new products where originality was forced upon the Japanese. This chapter also regards the international recognition of a new Japanese style.

The final chapter examines the string relationship between traditional Japanese designed objects and modern day manufactured goods. Unlike their Western counterparts, Japanese designers did not experience traditionalism as a form of nostalgia. In contrast to the West, traditional and modern ways of life exist simultaneously in today's Japan. This is a quality which distinguishes Japan from it's competitors, and gives it a unique competitive edge in the international market. This chapter also points out Sony's continuing tendency to create innovative products and indicates how the company has lived up to the goals of it's founders.

Chapter 1

`A nation is a historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture - Joseph Stalin (1879-1953).
(Aynsley,1993, pg58.)

On 15 Aug 1945, Japan's Emperor Hirohito announced in a national radio broadcast that the nation had been badly defeated. The cost of the war in human and economic terms had crippled the country. The country now faced the enormous task of surviving through chronic shortages of food, raw materials and industrial hardware. The disruption caused by years of war meant that those factories still in existence were outdated and badly equipped.

Japan faced the enormous challenge of reconstructing this idea of a national economy from utter devastation and national ruin to the prosperity we see in modern day Japan.

It was of great significance that the torn nation was occupied by American troops at this time, not only from the larger political and economical standpoint, but also for the history of Japanese design.

The consultant design profession in Japan was modelled on the practice of American industrial designers, who had been charged by manufacturers with stimulating consumer interest and multiplying sales during the depression and early post-war years, and whose well publicised success firmly linked their practices with the advance of economic recovery.
(Hiesenger & Fischer, 1994, Pg 32)

Regarding the devastation of their country at the end of the war and given their apprehension about the ability of the new government to restore them to normality, the Japanese sought out a new source of influence.

To the designers working amid this instability, unsure of their cultural or economic standing, America was the obvious candidate to act as a guide on the road to a civilised, modern world. American designers were the envy of Japan; they had been able to work in a modern, professional environment and see their designs follow through to production.

Japanese designers had suffered from want of materials and unstable economic structures throughout the war, and had lost faith somewhat in the country's ability to re-establish itself as before. In the eyes of these designers, all items that came across the ocean from the United States looked brilliantly new and were seen as symbols of civilisation. It may be said that the Japanese have an immense ability to approach problems pragmatically. Despite the pressure on the individual and the group to succeed in difficult conditions, the Japanese have the ability to recognise when they are up against overpowering odds, and to reorganise their plans and try another way.

The Japanese phrase "shigata ga nai" means "it cannot be helped" but it also has a secondary meaning, which roughly translates as "act of God". This phrase is used to explain typhoons, earthquakes and other uncontrollable events. It was also the essence of Japans acceptance albeit on a limited level, that not only was there a lack of alternatives to imitating

the Western lead, but also that there might be positive advantages in the long term.

In the newly democratised, parliamentary Japan, American imports reached all levels of the consumer market, and the government wanted to capture this broadened social base in it's plans for economic re-establishment and growth.

Among the first American Industrial Designers who visited Japan during this period was Raymond Loewy. He was Americas best known and most extravagant designer whose prolific designs included the Coldspot refrigerator (1934-1942) and Lucky Strike cigarettes package (1940 – 42). Starting with his conception of the Peace brand cigarette package in 1951, he may have exerted the most lasting influence on his Japanese counterparts. The simple sleek image of the package conformed to the standards of modern design that the new generation of Japanese designers sought.

Perhaps, more significant even than his professional work in Japan was the high fee Loewy received for this work of $4000. This instantly raised the prestige of the design profession and represented for Japanese designers one of the initial steps to their goal of being recognised as a valuable resource to the growing economy.

> *Ever since the Meiji Era, (1868 – 1912), when Japan entered the race for modernisation as a very late starter, the country has taken the shortest possible route in order to catch up with the United States and Europe. (Deevy, 1992 pg33).*

After its forceful emergence from isolation by the invasive Western powers, Japan realised that in order to safeguard it's national sovereignty, catching up with the west was an absolute necessity. This would not be an easy task. The most convenient and inexpensive method of achieving this ambition, and probably the only reasonable one, was to acquire and imitate the more advanced knowledge of technology and application of style from the more industrially mature Western countries. This would allow Japan to by-pass the preliminary and intermediate stages of development, which had taken Europe several centuries, and therefore aspire to equal, if not superior economic standing internationally. The Japanese did not question this process of imitation as copying. Historically, they do not feel the same pride in the creation of an original work that the modern Westerner does, or derive the same sense of achievement that such creation seems to give. The Japanese psyche values learning above creativity.

In the years immediately after the second world war, the design philosophy for electronics and communications products was curious and insufficiently confident. The underlying problem was the absence of an aesthetic lead in dealing with an innovative brief. In the field of textile design, for example designers had a well-established aesthetic vocabulary, and were familiar with the medium. Japanese manufacturers at this time were uncertain about creating an appealing external aesthetic for new products and generally resolved the matter by imitating US styling, paying little attention to the concept of complete design.

The Japanese clearly understood that in order to establish itself as a trading power it would have to set it's sights much further than it's national boundaries and seek out a global market for it's consumer products. Given that products which travel well across national boundaries improve the competitive posture of the country of origin Japan displayed a marked tendency for creating products which demonstrate a global appeal.

> *The aspirations of those seeking to implement the modernist creed in the inter-war years had been severely blunted by the rising tide of national identity in the increasingly difficult political and economic circumstances of the times. However, after the Second World War, with the widespread discrediting of traditional regimes and the waning of the power of imperialism in the western industrialised world, the internationalising values inherent in modernism no longer carried the same threat to national identity.*
> *(Woodham,1997 pg151).*

It was no accident that Japanese designers and marketers turned their attention considerably towards the consumer electronics industry as their ticket to international introduction. These technologically advanced products presented to the Japanese an opportunity to exercise their full manufacturing potential. These were products, which were small, had a high capital return, and an ever-expanding world market. For the most part, these products were inspired by those from the United States, many of course being designed with the American market specifically in mind. Their design philosophy, somewhat like the American model, concentrated on giving a

product market appeal or "style". In other words, enclosing technological components in a box, which was adorned with familiar motifs taken from contemporary American Automobile design, the symbol of popular culture in the 1950's.

Japan, at this stage, was restrained from liberating their designed products from the conventions laid down by the West. The consumer looks for the familiar and searches out the recognisable and so, in it's desire to catch up with the U.S. and Europe, Japan could not afford to take the risk of introducing any divergence in design styling. Even if the technology were brand new, if the product looks brand new it is more likely to put the consumer off. Products that look as though they do what they do in the eyes of the consumer tend to project a sense of logic which is reassuring.

Coinciding with this, it is now emerging that urban populations around the world have more in common with one another in terms of attitudes and life expectations than they do with rural populations in their own countries. In other words, market groups are changing from being vertical, or national to horizontal, or global.

The cultural discontinuity of the post-war years reflects the discontinuity introduced with the Meiji restoration during the late 19th century when the artefacts of the preceding Edo period were, for the most part destroyed or forgotten. Along the same vein, Japan chose to adopt quite abruptly, the new western style of design in the 40's and 50's.

During this period of rapid change, the Japanese government along with business and industry guided the course of post-war design with the aim of promoting exports and building a stable domestic market. The institutions it established in order to do this remain largely operational today. The Japan External Trade Organisation (originally called the Japan Export Trade Research Organisation or JETRO) was established in 1951 and provided the government with information on foreign markets by sending students abroad to study design and inviting foreign experts in design to visit Japan. Through the Ministry of International Trade and Industry, the prototype of the Japanese International Design Promotion Organisation (J.I.P.D.O.) was established.

There is a Japanese phrase, hachijutten shugi, which describes the sort of products which Japan could get by with before it's phase of rapid change and development. It means roughly, 80 percentism or "good enough". But hachijutten shugi was not good enough any more. It was, however, an unavoidable stage along the road of Japans development since the end of World War two.

> *The Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) co-ordinated the development and determined the priorities of key industries with a battery of interventionist policies. It was MITI that brought in the technology and quality control that made it possible for one industry after another to overtake longer established competitors abroad and build a Japanese export market.*
>
> *(Williams, 1992, Pg144).*

Probably the most famous of these firms was the Sony Corporation for the transistor device it licensed from the American Western Electric Company in 1953 and developed for use in Japans first transistor radios.

The period directly after the War, when Japan was world known for it's thieving and copycat tendencies remains unforgotten. American and European companies complained to the Japanese government in the 1950's about the blatant industrial pillaging that was taking place. In a bid to eliminate this problem the JIPDO established the G award system. Every year, selected new products were given this award for good design and genuine originality. It was then that Sony had the idea if using transistor technology. The Americans had invented this transistor technology but were using it only on hearing aids and did not see the viability of using the technology for any further applications. This innovative thinking on the part of Sony was a taste of what was to follow in later years for the Corporation.

Chapter 2

In October 1945 a handful of people arrived in Tokyo when it was a field of burnt rubble and established the Tokyo Telecommunications Research Laboratories. In May of the following year, Tokyo Telecommunications Engineering Corporation, the forerunner of Sony Corporation was born. Capitalised at 19,000 Yen, it had some twenty employees……Its founders were Masaru Ibuka and Akio Morita.
(Hiesenger & Fischer, 1994, Pg 47)

Finding and establishing new technology for its products was only part of the way forward for Sony and Japan. These products also had to be promoted aggressively and stand out as unique innovations if they were to remain and prosper in the competitive international market. In order to do this Sony needed to establish a strong corporate identity to form a lasting impression with its customers.

F.H.K Henrion, who established Henrion Design Associates (H.D.A) in 1951 was a pioneer in the field in Britain and in 1967, defined corporate identity thus:
A Corporation has many points of contact with various groups of people. It has premises, works, products, packaging, stationery, forms, and vehicles, publications and uniforms, as will as the usual kind of promotional activities. These things are seen by customers, agents, suppliers, financiers, shareholders, competitors, the press and the general public, as well as its own staff. The people in these groups build up their idea of the corporation from what they see and experience of it.
(Woodham, 1997, Pg 141)

Corporate identity was an aspect of the design profession that became especially significant in the post second world war period. This was due to the establishment and growth of multinational corporations and the increasing tendency for global products such as Coca-Cola, McDonalds hamburgers and the Sony Walkman. The consumer now had a choice and therefore became more discerning in what he/she would purchase. Goods were no longer bought on the sole basis of necessity, but were now purchased for their interesting attributes and implications. Corporate identity was a major factor in establishing Sony's market position. Whereas the actual products manufactured were the beginning of it's success, in the longer term the company's marketing personality was what ensured consumer loyalty and trust.

In the case of Sony Corporation this personality was based upon projecting an international image for it's products. Sony products signified global unity and high technology. The consumer was assured that when he bought a Sony television or hi-fi system, that it was the most up to date and high quality option in the market. The understanding was that if the product was acceptable in the rest of the world its quality was assured. In a sense what the company was doing was shaping the consumer around their needs by shaping patterns of consumer taste. Products were identified with a particular way of life and in one sense this strategy assumed a more political dimension.

> ……Products such as Coca-Cola and Levi's jeans became emblems of a democratic essentially American lifestyle in countries such as Japan and Germany which were seeking to throw off their recent associations with oppressive political regimes.
> (Woodham,1997, Pg 146).

In this sense it is difficult to evaluate the economic significance of corporate identity creation in the post second world war period.

It is interesting to note that the design department has now moved to the marketing sector within Sony. (It is now called the Merchandising and product communications strategy group). This change allows for tighter control of the Sony image – a more continuous flow from conceptualisation to selling. This means that it is not just a case of design management but rather the wider field of image management, which is important. This has been an important consideration for Sony since its early beginnings.

It is significant that Sony came into being just after the Second World War. It has always been more western orientated and Western-influenced than it's rivals in the Japanese consumer electronics industry and has now become a model of globalism. This was exemplified when the company chose it's present name, which Morita had invented following a trip to America. He learned that Sony was evocative of the Latin word for sound and the affectionate term for son. It was also easily pronounced, recognised and remembered.

Despite a strong American influence Sony's products have retained their simplicity, clarity, and compactness, all sustaining elements of

traditional Japan. Even though Sony depended on imported technology, it adopted and reinforced product potential with an entirely Japanese attention to detail. Indeed it may be said that the background of Sony reflects in many ways the rise of Japan itself as an industrial economic power.

At the inauguration of the new company in 1945 Masaru Ibuka stated that they could not compete by doing the same thing as other companies. His attitude reflects a forward thinking determination, which was a step ahead of the rest of Japan at the time. It is this attitude which highlights Sony as a forerunner for the international recognition of the whole of Japan as a formidable industrial competitor. Ibuka and Morita stated the philosophy of the new company thus:

1. *To build a model factory that is open, generous and welcoming, which will bring out the best skills of devoted technicians.*
2. *To participate actively in the cultural advancement for the reconstruction of Japan through technology and production.*
3. *To eschew unwanted profits always placing emphasis on validity and quality and to avoid the pursuit of expansion for expansion's sake.*
4. *To give utmost effort to the selection of products without avoiding –indeed welcoming –technological difficulties.*

(Hiesenger & Fischer, 1994, Pg32.)

Many other companies followed suit in formulating their own design policies and promoting them as an element of the company's structure and development. Upon returning from the U.S in 1951 Kowosuke Matsushita, president of the Matsushita Electrical Industrial Company established an

industrial design department at Matsushita (encompassing National Panasonic, Technics and Quasar). Sony appointed it's first full-time designer in 1954 and in 1961 instituted a specialised in-house design department. (Previously engineers had carried out design work). The job of these designers would not be an easy one, having no solid guidelines for Japanese design practice to follow.

> *Sony designers know that what they create must be achieved by overcoming daily challenges, by never imitating others, by imposing self discipline, by maintaining leadership and by steadily working towards modest goals in the face of indescribably fierce competition within the industry. Most Sony products have come into being in this way.*
> *(Hiesenger & Fischer, 1994, Pg38).*

Sony's ambition to create products, which did not imitate others, was a brave one considering that at the company's inception the country's economy was weak and copying would have provided an easier means of staying afloat. In the long term, however, Ibuka and Morita knew that the practice of imitation could not last indefinitely.

> *Sony's technical goal has long been to take product miniaturisation to its limits. In this respect, Sony is no different from any other Japanese corporation, but it does stand out as a leader. "It has no fear of being first while most Japanese manufacturers are happy to follow a leader".*
> *(Williams,1992 Pg 181)*

Sony tends to make products, which are even smaller and better than it's competitors. It also tends to introduce them sooner to the marketplace. This ongoing tradition for compactness has made room for the

designer and given him more freedom. With this, he is no longer designing around a black box of cumbersome components, but instead he is designing around the consumers and their particular needs. Increasingly, Sony is designing products, which are as easy to operate as they are to look at.

> *All else being equal, the most compact model on the market of certain types of product will have the cachet of appearing to be the latest. (In addition to any new uses that its compactness may give it). It is in its ability to satisfy this universal wish that Sony can be said to make global products.*
> *(Williams,1992, Pg 180).*

Unlike other longer established Japanese companies however, Sony did not begin its path to a global product range by total rejection of its traditional Japanese roots. Nor did it do so by embracing blindly the ways of the United States. There was a balance to be struck between the two. Sony could not allow national refinements to dominate its designs. On the other hand, it had to avoid producing bland undifferentiated products and loosing its competitive edge in the market sector. The only solution to the problem was to develop an entirely new image for its products. These products are global products, yet they are Sony products, and therefore recognised as being of Japanese origin.

Initially, it was the Americans who pointed the way to a successful future in consumer electronics. Ibuka was shown, by an official of the Civil Information and Education service, military tape recording technology. The

official was of the occupational forces and had received the tape recorder from the Germans as spoils of war. The type G tape recorder produced in 1950, was a first for Sony and for Japan. It was heavy and clumsy, but a series of innovative products were soon to follow. The type M was produced in 1951 and was Japans first portable tape recorder for professional use. The type H, intended for general use appeared shortly after. In 1950 also, T.T.K's (Tokyo Telecommunications Engineering Corporation) real breakthrough occurred. It was granted a licence from Bell Laboratories and Western Electric to manufacture the first transistor in Japan. The TR55 appeared in 1955. It was the first transistor radio and the first to bear the brandname "Sony".

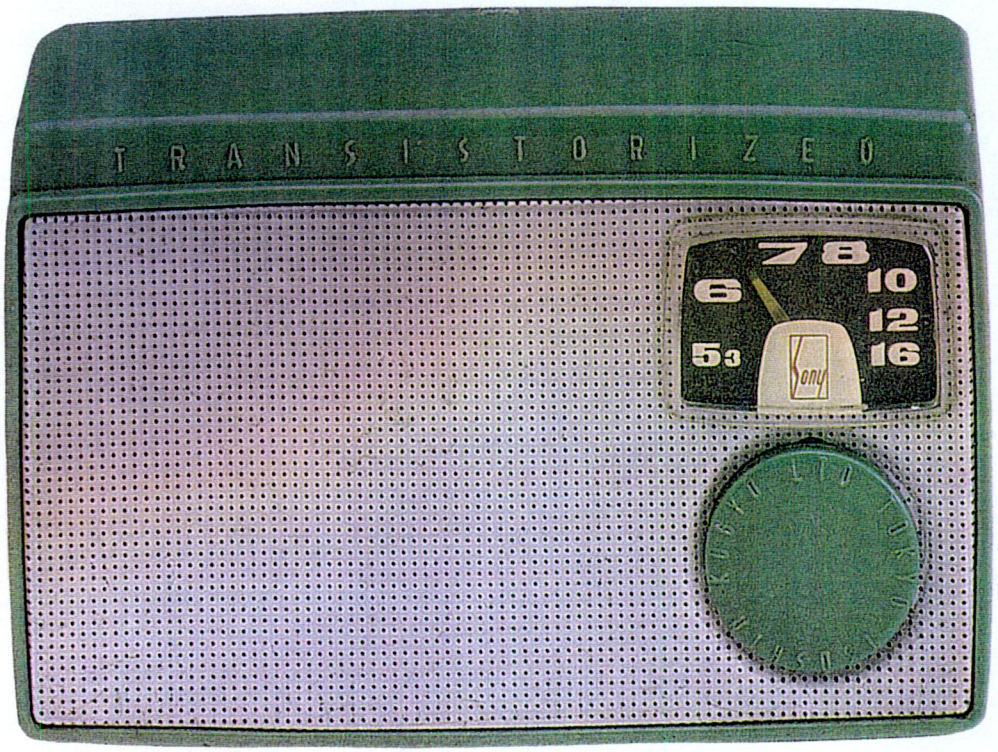

Figure 1. The Sony TR-55 transistor radio, 1955.

The transistor radio became Sony's first export when later that year, Canada's General Distributors, fascinated by this diminutive piece of technology, bought 50 examples. Three years later T.T.K. adopted Sony as its corporate name and quickly developed a reputation as one of japans most design conscious manufacturers.
(Deevy,1992, Pg 14)

Sony's designers are given a degree of freedom that is extremely uncommon in Japanese corporations.

90% of Japanese Designers are not artists in their own individual right but employees of large firms. In their design and product development departments, Sharp employ 200, Panasonic 500, Toyota 600, and Sony (including graphics), 2,500. Pioneering star designers such as Nigel Coates or Philippe Starke are almost unknown in Japan, since excessive individualism is frowned upon.
(Dietz & Monninger, 1992, Pg 5)

Chapter 3

Traditionally, the Japanese view personal expression and creativity as anti-social selfishness, and value more highly, the creation born of a communal effort to enhance their society. With this in mind, it is easy to understand that it was a completely different philosophy and not an inherent lack of creative thinking, which differentiated Japan from the West.

Sony's philosophy, however, is a somewhat different one. Reflecting the same balance between global and national styling it has managed to form a flexible and supportive environment for product innovation and productive managerial structures. Sony recruit personnel through advertisements in order to find the most capable and motivated people for the job.

Through Sony's managerial lead, closely followed by National, Honda, Nissan, Mitsubishi and others, the rigid and repressive structures of the old seniority system are beginning to break down. This is being replaced by a compound system combining the best of both Eastern and Western Management philosophies.

Nowadays, an individual designer rather than a design manager will present an idea, not only to sales and engineering but also to top management. Despite the designers recognition within the company, when compared to the U.S. or Europe, Japan has not often recognised celebrity designers. Sony employees take great pride in being part of such a

successful company, and will remain fully committed to it. To this end, the status of the company will always come first and the designer, however influential, within the company structure, will humbly take a step back, content with the knowledge that he has served his employers well.

In his book "The Design Dimension", Christopher Lorenz summed up the four functions of Industrial design at Sony:

> *It's regular work on every new product, from compact discs to the latest Walkman derivative, its initiation of product concepts; and its championing of concepts brought in from elsewhere in the company. Allied to all three is a fourth, co-ordination of the work of other functions divisions or departments to an extent which sometimes amounts to what many other companies call product management or programme management.*
> *(Lorenz, 1990, Pg 90-91.)*

The TR-610 radio is a good example of a successful product resulting from the joint teamwork of managers, engineers and designers. It became a landmark in the history of design and led to the name "Sony" being used throughout the world for transistor radios themselves. The TR-610 was a small and relatively very thin radio that was operational with one hand and "pocket-sized". The importance of this particular design is contained in many elements. The development of a new battery, a speaker that was that much thinner than before and the skilful placement of electrical parts along with the concept of elevating the speaker to a position that would preserve the thinness of the body, required a certain level of technological advancement. The banding of the speaker with a brass ring

plated with real gold made it the focal point of the total design. It also broke new ground in that it was available in an unprecedented three-colour version – ivory, red and black.

Figure 2. The Sony TR-610 pocket sized transistor radio.

This radio was exported world-wide and became very popular in the U.S reaching sales of over half a million units for the one model alone.

> *Japanese electronics firms pushed rapid technological innovation with semiconductor devices to make their products new, better, and different while becoming ever smaller and increasingly multifunctional. Since manufacturers could copy and bring to market quite complex products within a few months, innovation and rapid introduction of models remained a key to staying ahead. (Hiesenger and Fischer, 1994, Pg 36)*

The introduction of the world's first all transistor television, the Sony TV8-301 exemplified Sony as the source of high quality miniaturised consumer electronics. This television, with its irregularly spaced control knobs and grill slots reflecting a sense of traditional Japanese asymmetry as well as its projecting hood that overhung the screen like a Japanese roof to reduce glare, enhanced the worldwide perception of Japan as an innovator and designer. Almost overnight, the creation of miniature products became synonymous with Japan itself, and Sony became the initiator of a new perception of modern Japan.

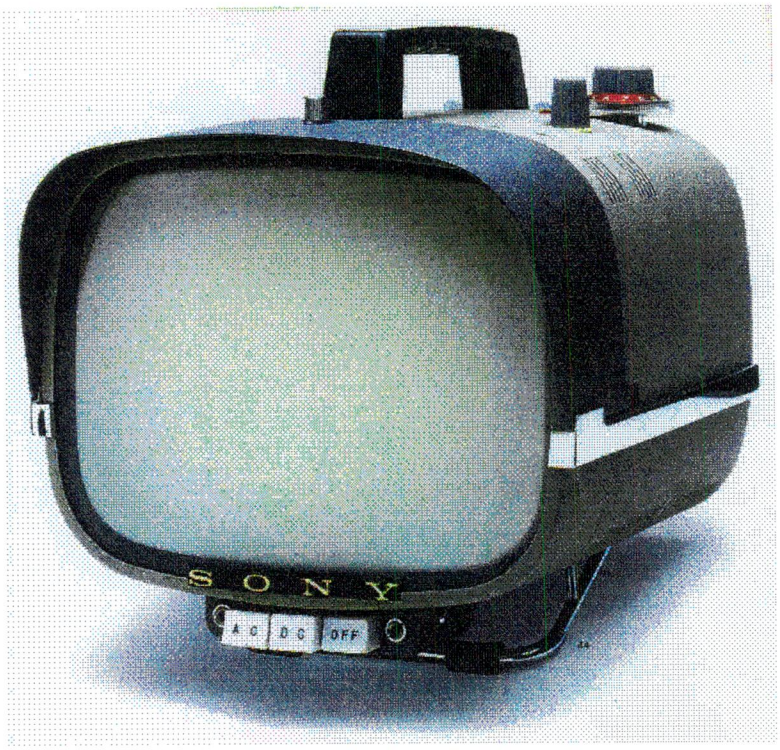

Figure 3. Sony TV-8-301 Portable transistor television

An increasing characteristic of post-war Japanese Design was an almost compulsive interest in ever smaller and more compact electronic products. While American manufacturers such as Motorola were making bigger and bigger television sets for the luxury consumption of the sixties, Sony was going the other direction entirely. Perfecting the technology in place for the TV8-301 and subsequently developing an eight inch and five inch screen variations, the suggestion was that the more compact the package, the more sophisticated and advanced it's components were. On a more fundamental level however, this miniaturisation was quite unique to Japan and therefore represented an ideal opportunity for it to break away from the Western lead and assert itself as an independent manufacturing power. Furthermore, in using a very definite Japanese aesthetic for the TV8-301 with its simple lines, clear form, and asymmetry, along with its ease of use, and portability, Sony made a very purposeful effort to highlight itself as a world leader in transistor technology.

> *During the 60,s and 70's as the Japanese economy drew level with and then overtook those of much of the West, Industrial Designers grew in confidence and originality, feeling it was less necessary to follow the West's lead blindly.*
> *(Deevy, 1992, Pg 20).*

In a sense, Japan was forced into original design as it began to break new ground technologically. There were simply no models to be imitated.

As well as the new tradition for miniaturisation, Japanese industry also discovered a valuable innate talent it had for creating modular assemblies. This

As well as the new tradition for miniaturisation, Japanese industry also discovered a valuable innate talent it had for creating modular assemblies. This was an essential element in indigenous architecture and crafts and can be seen in any traditional Japanese house. Rooms are not strictly divided but are seen as adaptable areas of living space, which can be added together or divided as needed. Traditionally, the interior of the house is measured in multiples of the "tatami" or sleeping mat, making each element compatible with the others.

Figure 4. Traditional Japanese domestic interior.

This talent unwittingly proved of great benefit to the audio electronics industry. Released in the early seventies, the hi-fi stereo sound system

deck, stereo amplifier, and a dual speaker system. These could be combined to form a high quality integrated music system. This marked yet another step in Japans path to establishing itself as a serious international manufacturing power and innovator. The days of cheap imitation were quickly disappearing.

While America was the place where the profession of Industrial design came into being, it was quite clear that it was slipping in many respects in the case of this profession.

> *The same ideals that placed the principles if choice, quality, convenience and inventiveness before people in due course also gave rise to planned obsolescence, gadgetry and gimmickry, and paradoxically, perpetuated a low level of design awareness. This is now a contributor to America's comparative lack of competitiveness in the international trade in manufactured goods.*
> *(Williams, 1992, Pg155)*

Perhaps it was Japans later rise to affluence, which gave it greater appreciation of well-designed goods. Alternatively, it may have been the innate tendency of the Japanese people to regard themselves as elements of a larger social situation rather than individuals. In this case more regard is given to detail because it is seen as a contribution to the common creation and therefore carries with it more importance because it is an effort towards the greater communal result rather than an individual creation. This would go towards explaining its initial desire to follow the lead of America rather than going it alone.

One way or another, Japan no longer had a stable lead to follow, nor did it need one, so it was pushed into independent innovation. Also, this rise to affluence meant a parallel rise in labour costs and therefore production. There subsequently arose the need to introduce an alternative selling point to just low priced goods. Better product development and production practices were now necessary.

The Japanese held the advantage over American industry in the qualification of its factory workers. In Japan they do not concentrate on a single function as in the west but rather, each worker is capable of applying a variety of skills on the assembly line. The average Japanese industrial worker will carry out repairs, quality control and parts preparation - all tasks that would require a team of specialist technicians in the West.

A further reason for Japans changeover from imitator to innovator was the emergence of the other Asian countries as serious competitors. Adopting a tendency for economical mass production, these countries, (Hong Kong, Singapore, Korea and Taiwan and the cheap labour nations from the Philippines to China) ousted Japan from its position. Cheap mass production ceased to represent an effective means of competition and the acceleration of technological development and quality control became paramount. It was no longer the price of the goods but it was now the technical and formal qualities of its products that maintained Japans success. The Japanese government's plan of 1960 to double Japanese

incomes had surpassed itself and had produced Asia's first modern consumer society.

In order to compete effectively against the nations of South and Southeast Asia, Japan was led to rediscover a distinctive culture of design and consider what constituted a Japanese aesthetic identity.

Two German institutions, the Deutsche Werkebund and the Bauhaus, were very influential to young Japanese of this generation. This was due to the similarity of their philosophies and aesthetic to the Japanese concept of beauty and functionality. More importantly, these institutions served to remind Japan of it's own rich heritage and how it could be applied in the contemporary world.

The question then was, what were the outstanding characteristics of Japanese design?. According to Masato Isaka of the G.K. design firm they are a sense of simplicity, compactness and fine detailing – the "less is more" philosophy. The Japanese care about detailing. They always look at a product in its small aspects and build from the inside out.

Styling was also an important means for Japan to create its unique signature in the international manufacturing world. As well as establishing a particular Japanese Design ethos, styling also became a deciding factor in the recognition of Japanese products. This aspect of product design needed to be taken very seriously in order that these products would be accepted in the global market while maintaining their unique Japanese origins. To this end, the resulting products incorporated in their aesthetic, the harmonious

asymmetry, purity and incompleteness in pattern seen in traditional Japanese pottery and silk screening. This was done with great subtlety in order that the styling would not dominate the actual design.

The Germans for example, still think of the product as a whole and it is well detailed only because detailing is seen as the next phase towards functionalism.

> *Modern Japan is a unique example of the way in which a sophisticated urban culture has adopted Western methods to take on and outstrip the west in terms of trade, industry and the like and yet to a remarkable degree, has retained it's distinctive character.*
> *(Earle, 1980, pg13)*

There was much unease about what was being lost to the West and there was a determination to re-affirm not just a modern but a specifically Japanese identity. Japanese designers and manufacturers were learning that they now had more influence in the world of design and did not need to sacrifice their identity or their talent for design any longer in order to gain recognition.

Japanese economist Fichi Sakiga sees in the collection of parts that only become a whole through combination – a reflection of the fundamental structure of Japanese society and also Japanese environment. Western knowledge may be compared with a Jumbo jet. The individual components do not need to be perfect as long as the craft flies. What is important is the whole product. The Japanese on the other hand will produce a thousand parts, all perfect to the last detail which will add up to the finished product

but more importantly, they will add up to a thousand perfect parts. It was this quality which spawned the tradition of modularization as seen in the hi-fi stereo units of the 70's and 80's.

Moreover, Japanese products tend to take ergonomics that much further, towards an almost organic aesthetic, and with this consumer electronics products tend to lack an ugly reverse or underside. This stems from the same logic as the practice of miniaturisation, to create an unobtrusive fully functional product that is in harmony with its environment. Design has taken a somewhat moral dimension in that there is not a lot of space available to the individual and this minimisation is actually cost related. (The idea that the talent for miniaturisation is serving the fact that the Japanese are on average, 10 centimetres shorter than Westerners need only be mentioned here as a humorous coincidence).

Taking all of these Japanese characteristics, of miniaturisation, compactness, and precision into account it is easy to understand how to became renowned for its global electronics goods. Japan and electronics now go hand in hand, just as Hollywood and filmmaking, Belgium and chocolate. According to Michael Porter of Harvard Business School, "global industry leaders always begin with some advantage created at home, weather it be preferred product design, a higher level of product quality, a new marketing concept or a factor cost advantage". In the case of Japan it was its ability to transfer its innate talents for miniaturisation, compactness,

modularization and simplicity, onto Western products, thus creating space for a more Japanese identity within the global market.

The Japanese did it by bringing to life the qualities of old Japan, clarity, purity and simplicity, irregularity, asymmetry, the love of incompleteness, and the use of pattern, representation and quotation. This was done passively rather than consciously as can be seen in the TV-8 described earlier or the TR-610 transistor radio, also described. In a bid to enter the international marketplace and catch up with Europe and the U.S., Japan did not believe that a sudden introduction of traditional national qualities would get them very far. The most reliable way forward was to build upon what was already acceptable in the world market.

Due to the cultural and sociological changes brought about with the Meiji restoration, when most of the artefacts and artistic elements of the preceding Edo period were destroyed, Japan lacks the historical continuity experienced by Western cultures. Traditionalism and modernism are now present side by side as opposed to modernism being an extension of traditionalism. In this sense, where the west may use nostalgia in present day goods as a means of giving a product some emotional appeal, the Japanese are inventing a new Japanese modern based on the combination of traditional and modern ways of life currently present.

> *The originality of contemporary Japanese design is coming into its own. It is not merely a matter of recovering a traditional Japanese style. Rather it is the manifestation of a new Japan, one which has finally broken away self-confidently from perfectionist imitations of western culture.(Dietz & Monninger, 1992, Pg112).*

The introduction of the Walkman in1979 marked a significant step towards Japans success and proved an exemplary product for Sony. This product originated in the extreme overcrowding of Japanese cities where the use of headphones allowed for individual acoustic privacy where physical privacy could not be attained. It also appealed to a broad international group, mostly of a younger age group, to whom it represented freedom and modern styling, as well as being a fashion item. Since then Sony designers have created over 500 Walkman models – 50 new per year.

Figure 5. Original Sony Walkman. 1979.

Over the years there has been a broadening of both price range and the range of functions offered. This leads to a broader consumer group with a range of geographical position and lifestyle. This wide range of products ensures the widest possible market acceptance. While it may be argued that the Walkman is a global product it remains innately Japanese in its concept and ideals. The extended level of small detailing, and miniaturisation with the overall completeness of design and the ideal of privacy in an overcrowded environment clearly shows this.

Purposely highlighting Japan as its major influence, is the example of the WM-109. Designed by Masayashi Tsuchiya, a designer within Sony's audio group, this particular model bore a striking Japanese character. Tsuchiya took the idea for this black and white walkman from a fashion photograph, then looking for a suitable finish, he decided on one which he noticed on a ceramic chopstick holder. The depth and hard coolness of the double painted metal of the product communicates the blue-whiteness of the porcelain. Interestingly, this Walkman lasted some three years in a market where the usual life span is only six months.

Figure 6. Sony WM-109.

There was no need to create a high-tech image to carry this product in the marketplace, the technology was already recognised and admired. The consumer was assured of quality leaving the designer free to show the expressive and individual nature of the product.

> *These (miniaturised) goods emphasised the expressive and innately mysterious function of high technology products through visual simplification.*
> *(Sparke,1982, pg56).*

Figure 7. Traditional Japanese Porcelain bowl.

In the case of the WM-109 it is clear that its cultural content became a tradable commodity. Its appeal lay in the suggestion of Japanese porcelain, and the pure clarity of the overall form. Ironically, in a market, which the Japanese had entered by imitation, they were now remaining through original national ideas.

Chapter 4

Modern Japan established enduring values and parameters for Japanese design through combining traditional design elements and craft techniques. As discussed in chapter two, the traditional ability for modularization, adaptability, and compactness had proved valuable qualities for modern design. This however was quite a sub-conscious matter in most cases, keeping in mind that the original objective was to catch up with the west by imitation.

> *In certain areas such as New York you find fully self contained Spanish communities, living in Spanish districts, eating Spanish food, reading Spanish newspapers and watching Spanish cable television. They are exposed to the same experiences as other Americans but choose to hold onto their national identity.*
> *(Deevy, 1992, Pg 22).*

Much like the self-segregated cultural communities in New York, the Japanese, no matter how technologically advanced they became and no matter now much influence the West would have, had a very human tendency to hold onto their own cultural roots.

The Japanese however are unlike other countries in the way they manage to allow the presence of traditional and modern side by side.

> *It is not lack of resources that prevents some form of union from being achieved between the handwork involved in making ceramic or enamelled wooden articles and the advanced manufacturing technology that makes possible high quality plastic and consumer electronics products.*
> *(Williams, 1992, Pg151)*

Rather the reason for this duality is due to a lack of continuity in Japanese History. Instead of modern culture being a continuation from traditional culture, as in Western countries, Japan was forced to make a sudden leap into the modern world of design. Because of this, a tolerance has been reached for two very different ways of life to prosper simultaneously. This is reflective of the disparity that exists among buildings in Japanese cities and the modular aesthetic present in much of their manufactured goods.

The characteristics which defined traditional Japanese architecture and craft products can be seen still in the most up-to-date Sony products. These demonstrate the present acceptance of traditional ideas of beauty alongside the latest technological innovations and new materials.

The sharp contrast of colour used in Japanese painting and fabric decoration is strongly present in today's products.

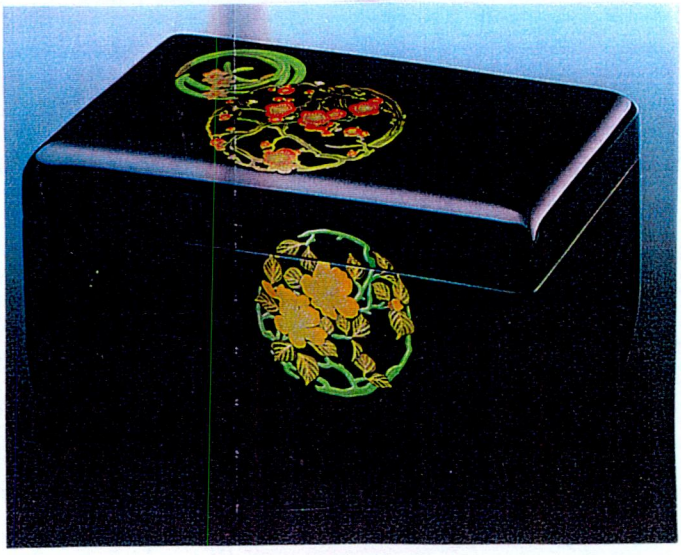

Figure 8. Traditional Japanese lacquered trinket box.

Figure 9. WM EX5 Personal Stereo, 1998.

Looking at the WM Ex5 we can see a strong link with the laquerwork of screens and wooden boxes in the traditional home. Its dominant visual feature lies in the simple flat black reflective panel. Evidently indicating a substantial and distinctive Japanese personality. Scarcely bigger than the cassettes played inside it, the WM Ex5 takes advantage of all the latest technology available to its designers. This includes a rechargeable battery and a tiny remote control housing a L.C.D. screen. In true Sony tradition, this product stands out as a leader in both technology and aesthetic. Evidently, the Japanese interpretation of simplicity is very different from its Western implications. It does not mean the lack of sophistication suggested in the Western understanding. Along traditional lines of thinking, simplicity is sophistication, and nowhere is it more evident than in the design of this WM Ex5 personal stereo. Traditionally the elimination of flamboyant decoration is considered as being reflective of honest skill. When superfluous distractions have been eliminated the true beauty of the creation may be admired.

This has stood the Japanese in good stead in the modern day world of marketing where cultural identity has become a tradable asset and has proved integral to Japans success in a global market. This also holds true in the case of Sony where it's brand name and Japanese origins are recognised world-wide. Indeed Sony staff will be quick to point out that Sony

came second only to Coca-Cola in a 1990 survey of international brand recognition by Lander associates.

It may be said that the promotion of national identity and the growth of Sony have occurred hand in hand, The larger the company became the more global influence it attained. This meant that the opportunity to use this influence was available to promote national identity, and Sony did this by the occasional introduction of products such as the Walkman-109, which displayed an unmistakable Japanese origin. In turn, because of the strong affiliation between Japan and Sony more global recognition was received by the company.

In recent years partly due to the more comfortable position of Sony in the global marketplace, consumer electronics products have adopted a more imaginative and emotional appeal, much like the Italians initiated with their emotional furniture designs in the early 1980's. Flexible manufacturing systems and computer-aided design also contributed to this. Designers have gained greater leeway to dispense with research on new developments. Instead, they can be tested in the marketplace. Flexible manufacturing allows the production of short product runs with a wide range of choice which means that large sums of money are not lost if a particular product does not succeed as planned. Also, naturalism has been introduced into product forms especially in personal stereos and cameras.

These products have adopted an almost organic aesthetic with great attention given to ergonomics and ease of use. This tendency has also allowed greater opportunity to differentiate rival goods.

Flexible manufacturing has allowed the designer to accommodate smaller, more particular social groups and personal tastes. For Sony, consumer preference research is foremost in their marketing strategy. To this end, a number of design research centres have been established in cities such as Barcelona, New York and San Francisco, which send back design concepts for sifting through in Tokyo. This has allowed Sony to continue as before and remain the market leader in the consumer electronics sector, It continues to release new products at an ever-increasing rate.

Sony first introduced MiniDisc systems in 1992. Since then, compact size, superb sound quality, and digital recording and editing capabilities have fuelled solid growth in demand for these systems, primarily in Japan and Europe. Recently, Sony has enlarged its entire MiniDisc product line-up including MiniDisc Walkman models, MD personal component stereo systems MD decks and car MD players. These actions reinforced Sony's position at the forefront of the industry.

In the field of home use camcorders, Sony is aggressively developing models with extended operating times and compact size. In Autumn 1995, Sony launched a home use digital "Handycam" camcorder that was the world's first audio-visual device to incorporate an IEEE1394 – based digital

input/output connector. A newly introduced Handycam has an 8-hour continuous recording capability and another new digital Handycam is only as long and wide as a passport.

Sony continues to stand out as a leader for other similar companies and its products continue to be imitated.

Throughout its history, Sony has been a source of unique products based on advanced technology. Sony products have continuously surprised and intrigued customers over the years. The reason lies in the superiority of each element including performance ease-of-operation, and design. Sony is always trying to exceed the expectations of customers, To this end, Sony conducts exhaustive studies to determine everything from easy-to-use, sophisticated designs to the desired performance and functions of each product.

During 1998 Sony launched a series of products including camcorders, and MD Walkman models, as well as CD Walkman portable CD players. All deliver high performance, low power consumption, and compact size. Other examples include the Wega Series of colour TV's with the industry's first flat-surface cathode ray tube, and the VAIO notebook PC's, beautifully designed to be both slender and lightweight. These products have been well received in the market by satisfying customers through their excellent fundamental performance and elegant exteriors. In the field of electronics, Sony remains dedicated to developing leading-edge

technology and creating hardware that achieves the highest standards possible by blending performance, quality, and design.

Conclusion

It seems quite a paradox to consider the current international envy about Japans enormous balance of trade surplus especially in the case of the U.S. In the words of Japans former Prime Minister, Masayoshi Ohiva, "The beginning was thanks to the Americans' guidance and generosity, the rest was of Japanese doing".

In the years after World War Two, after years of war and a degrading defeat, the Japanese were left with a crushed nation in terms of both morale and economy. If the Japanese were to regain any form of economic revival they saw little alternative than to follow the example of the west in terms of mass production of consumer durables. Due to the strong presence of American Occupational forces at the time the U.S. seemed the obvious lead to follow. While the general plan for Japanese revival was based on following the lead of the West, the long-term goal was to eventually surpass its American and British leaders. In order to do this, Japanese manufacturers needed to create products which appealed to the global market. Consumer electronics seemed ideally suited to the application of this plan and government incentives were given to manufacturers who participated in providing products for the global market.

One such company was Sony. Established immediately after the Second World War, it provides a significant example of a truly global manufacturing corporation. While Sony embraced Western design and

managerial practices, it did not loose sight of its Japanese origins. The company was one of Japans first to make use of in-house designers and eventually led the way for others to create innovative Japanese design formats.

Through the global appeal of Sony's products, international recognition was gained for the company and for Japan itself. In this respect, greater leeway was given to Japanese manufacturers to establish a new aesthetic vocabulary for their products.

The practice of producing cheap imitation goods was no longer a viable one given that the poorer Asian nations were catching up and Japan needed to maintain its international position. In the case of some new products such as the fax machine and the Sony Walkman the option to imitate the west was unavailable. Innovation was forced upon the Japanese in such cases where there was simply nobody to copy.

Having established its position in the global market, Japan was now able to incorporate its traditional design philosophies to modern products.

It is interesting to observe that the parallel relationship of Japanese modern, and Japanese traditional, which exist harmoniously side by side, has presented to Japan a unique opportunity to distinguish itself from other manufacturing nations.

The design qualities of traditional Japanese architecture and crafts are evident even in the most up to date products. These properties of simplicity, clarity, asymmetry and attention to detail along with the constant

preoccupation with miniaturisation and the application of modularization have become an aesthetic signature for Japan. In recent years this unique modern Japanese identity has become a tradable commodity and has affiliated Japan with the creation of quality consumer electronics products worldwide.

Essentially, it is the unique ability of the Japanese to decide and agree on a long-term, dependable course of action and to unite to achieve the common goal that has been responsible for Japans spectacular rise to international competence. Japanese society has constantly been redesigning itself according to the requirements of the period, and it is this flexibility that has allowed the Japanese nation to use Western infiltration to its advantage and gain a leading edge in the manufacture and design of electronics products.

As Mr. Nobuyuki Idei, Sony's President and co-chairman, put it recently, "21st century Sony is a place where people will gather, purchase, and dream with us." For consumers we will be the creator and integrator of many of life's richest experiences.

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