



Jackson, Simon. (2005). Designing for a new consumer. *Curve*. (12).

Copyright © 2005 (Please consult author).

This is the author's version of the work. It is posted here with permission of the publisher for your personal use. No further distribution is permitted. If your Library has a subscription to this journal, you may also be able to access the published version via the library catalogue.

Designing for a new consumer

Government's push for industrialisation and consumption.

After WWII, Australians were far better skilled technically than they had been at any time before. There was an abundance of war surplus machinery with which to make consumer goods and few imports to damage the local industry. The post-war 'baby boom' and immigration schemes boosted the population, especially of the capital cities, and thus the demand for housing and consumer goods. Newly-arrived immigrants also provided vital technical and business skills.

In addition to the invigorated post-war manufacturing industries, Australia was comparatively wealthy as prices for traditional primary exports (wool, wheat, sugar) were high. In the 1960s, a new form of export commodities, minerals, were sent to Japan, resuming a trade link that had had its first major demonstration in Australia's controversial export of pig-iron in the late 1930s. These exports increased Australia's prosperity, and gave another identity of what it meant to be Australian - images of mining activity joined the existing Australian national symbols of sporting activities and agriculture in popular publications. This economic boom period lasted almost 30 years, looked back on now as a golden era of near full employment and strong exports.

After WWII, there was a huge demand for domestic appliances, and very few local companies to supply this need. Architect and design commentator Robin Boyd noted in his text *Australia's Home*: 'The average Australian wanted to be as well off as the American in possession of television sets, refrigerators, better stoves and cars, but he understood that the industries of his own country were not yet geared to mass-produce these things at a cost within his reach.' And even when manufacturing began to supply the newly emerged "consumer society", Boyd lamented that local products were ten years behind America in their design values:

Most of the helpful kitchen apparatus which was illustrated in the coloured advertisements of American magazines was, at any time in the twentieth century, about ten years in advance of Australia. Dish-washers, garbage-disposers and double-oven stoves were virtually unknown in Australia before 1950, except for isolated examples imported from America. The tumbler-type automatic clothes-washer and the pressure cooker made their first Australian appearances as late as 1948. Such an obvious labour-saver as a self-lighting device was virtually unknown to

Australian gas stoves, and many gas and electric models demanded the more thorough supervision of the cook for want of a simple thermostat or automatic switch.

Refrigeration - pioneering innovation.

Most books on Australian innovation, industrial design or manufacturing include a reference to the pioneering research into refrigeration conducted by Australians faced with the problem of shipping meat supplies to Britain. As early as 1885 the Victorian Atmospheric Refrigeration company showed a model refrigerator at the *Victorian Centennial Exhibition* which, the *Exhibition Catalogue* claimed, had 'impressed visitors from overseas'. In the early 1900s the local company La Wernier was manufacturing commercial and domestic refrigeration equipment. Despite this early Australian lead, American manufacturing might soon dominated world production of white goods as it had the car industry. American electric stoves were imported into the Australian market from 1907 while the first electric refrigerators arrived from America five years later. While other local companies Emmco (1927), and Kelvinator (1932) and New System Telephones manufactured refrigerators and washing machines, it was not until 1934 with the formation of the Email company that large volume Australian production began.

Cooking appliances.

Boyd is one of the few Australian design commentators to have written about appliance design. He summarised the design process well:

All mechanical equipment design followed a similar cycle. First the invention was made in the image of the thing it was replacing - thus the first gas stoves in black cast-iron were on the model of the fire stoves, and later the first electric cookers were on the model of the gas. Then each new device smartened itself and developed its own personality. The black gas stove acquired nickel-plated parts, then some castings were enamelled. By 1939 the stove was entirely enamelled and available in a wide choice of colours, none more popular than cream and green. At the same time, the mechanics were perfected, and a few expensive models were elaborated with thermostatic control, clock control, automatic pilot-light starting, and other features which were to be lost again temporarily in the *post-war return to primitive essentials*.

As with many areas of Australian industrial design and manufacturing, Australian attempts to manufacture stoves began early. Wood stoves were manufactured in Adelaide as early as the 1870s. Gas power gave a new impetus to stove manufacturing as did the wide-spread delivery of electricity to capital cities in 1920. Email began to mass produce stoves in Australia in

1934. In addition to stoves, many other appliances which used electricity began to be manufactured locally - radiators in 1920, refrigerators in 1926, washing machines in 1929.

The practice of manufacturing under license and the domination of international companies manufacturing in Australia accelerated in the 1950s and characterised much local production in that and subsequent decades. While in 1953 there were 35 different white goods manufacturers in Australia, a decade later there were only 21. Several small companies were acquired by larger ones. (For example, during the 1950s Craig & Seeley acquired Chef.) In 1973, with the removal of import quotas and reduction of tariffs, this number was reduced again. Many mergers in the local market date from this period: Vulcan absorbed Craig & Seeley while Email absorbed Metters. Other local manufacturers did not survive - in 1973 New World and Wilkins Servis were forced into liquidation. By 1979, the strong local company Email acquired the rights from American automotive giant General Motors to manufacture under license their Frigidaire range of products. In this year also, the Dutch company Philips began local production of stoves. Further reduction of 'protection' resulted in fewer local manufacturers in the decade after 1975.

Light fittings.

An important design exhibition held in Melbourne in 1956 featured locally designed and manufactured light fittings. The *Melbourne Arts Festival of the XVI Olympiad* featured wall lamp brackets designed by Selwyn and Joyce Coffey, torches by Edward Worsley and lighting by Clement Meadmore. All were manufactured locally, according to (the late) designer Ron Rosenfeldt, who wrote an important essay within the *Olympiad* catalogue entitled 'Industrial Design.' Reviewing the Coffeys' design with the benefit of some five decades of hindsight one can see why they were selected as examples for the exhibition. Austere but balanced and sleek in appearance they seem to have been 'true to their materials' and production process when such things denoted 'good design'. There was no attempt to make these objects appear to be anything other than what they were - simple, functional metal light fittings.

In his book entitled *Australian Housing in the Forties & Fifties*, historian Peter Cuffley has listed what he considered were the best known light fittings in Australian houses in the 1940s and 1950s, although how much local industrial design was undertaken in this area is uncertain. These included Kempthorne, Crown, Aladdin, Rite Lite, General Electric and Dupelite.

Radios.

Radios have been another major arena of Australian design and manufacturing activity. The relatively simple technologies in the 1920s and 1930s allowed small local companies to produce the electronics and to hand-craft wooden cabinets to house them. Bakelite examples followed in the 1930s and 1940s. It is interesting to note radio cabinets designed in this new medium initially mimicked the appearance of traditional wooden construction until the medium was allowed to suggest more organic forms. Historian Robert Renew noted in *Making It: Innovation and Success in Australia's Industries* that in the middle of the 1930s, engineers (not designers or artists) were employed as 'stylists' of radios which were later cast in thermosetting plastics.

Despite Boyd's lament that Australia was late to share in the new technology (he claimed in *Australia's Home*. 'Progress in radio and phonographic reproduction reached Australia only after several years of trial overseas') in the 1950s many were boasting of the dynamism of the local industry. The 1952 *Made in Australia Exhibition* (Exhibition Buildings, Melbourne) paid homage to the success of the Australian radio industry:

In Victoria, radio had taken its place as one of the State's first half dozen industries, both in value and output and in number of people engaged. The manufacture of radio and all types of electronic equipment played an important part in Australia's war effort between 1939 and 1945...The industry anxiously awaits the opportunity to get on with the production of television, both for entertainment and for industrial purposes.

Historian Michael Bogle noted in *Design in Australia 1788-1970*, the Amalgamated Wireless Australasia company (AWA), formed in 1916, dominated the Australian market and employed several Australian designers including R. Haughton James, Don Goodwin, Carl Nielsen, John Holt and Charles Furey. Bogle noted other design and manufacturing opportunities existed locally in the companies A. G. Healing, Pye Industries, Kreisler Radio, HMV and Philips, despite the fact most of these were international companies. Edward Healey's *Golden Voice* mantel radio was a popular consumer item throughout the 1950s. A simply styled plastic unit, this model was displayed as an example of good Australian design at *The Melbourne Arts Festival of the XVI Olympiad*. Other notable local designs included Astor's *Mickey* of the early 1950s and the HMV *Little Nipper* which appeared in 1957.

Australian designers and Australian manufacturing have a long history from which to draw.