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The history of awards for Industrial Designers in Australia.

With the Awards season for designers upon us it is timely to reflect upon the history of supporting and promoting design in Australia. Several case studies are given – various awards made by professional design associations, the Sebel Design Award and the National Award for Inventors.

Professional association awards.

In the early days of the industrial design profession in this country, several awards were established to further the cause of ‘good design’ in Australian-made goods. The purpose behind the introduction of these awards was as much about rewarding design talent as it was about educating the public. The Industrial Design Council of Australia (IDCA) was established in 1958 and quickly introduced three awards. The first was called the Design Selection Label but was referred to popularly as the Good Design Label. This acknowledgement of merit could be affixed to a selected product in the market place for three years. There was also an IDCA Design Index Label. Recipients of this award won the right to have their designs shown in IDCA promotions in Australia and abroad and were automatically eligible for the second IDCA award - the Australian Design Award. Winners of the Australian Design Award were eligible to vie for a premier award - the Prince Philip Prize for Australian Design, established in 1967.1 This was an extension of the award offered to top British designers (the Prince Philip Prize) and was awarded to Australia’s best designers until 1987 when it was dropped and the Australian Design Award became the highest Australian industrial design accolade. That this British prize lasted so long is an indication of a continuing British cultural hegemony at work in Australian industrial design culture.

Once prizes were awarded, several mechanisms were in place to ensure winning products received public exposure. The IDCA organised several ‘public awareness’ campaigns. Its award labels were affixed to winning products at the point of sale ensuring consumer interest; award-winning products were included in IDCA displays and promotions in Australia and abroad, and the IDCA assisted in arranging

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television, print-media and point of sale promotion (posters and information). There is no doubt these labels and awards were an effective means of industrial design promotion.

The Australian media also gave winners exposure. For example, Peter Hunt’s ‘Eye on Design’ series in *The Australian Home Beautiful* often featured the work of Award recipients. In his column in May 1970, Hunt wrote a review of the modular square metal tube furniture manufactured by Cube Furniture Co., Melbourne. These articles of furniture had been awarded a IDCA *Design Index Label*, he wrote, ‘which means that the furniture has undergone a rigorous inspection by a panel of experts.’ In July 1970, Hunt noted an Australian designed, British manufactured Smith’s clock was the recipient of an IDCA *Good Design Label*. Late that year Hunt wrote a page long review of Australian industrial designer Paul Schremmer’s Primus portable stove, recipient of a ‘*Good Design Label* from the IDCA’. Readers of the magazine could therefore make informed purchasing decisions.

Two other early Australian Industrial Design Awards deserve to be remembered.

**Case study - the Sebel Design Award - 1967-1970.**

The *Sebel Design Award* was an attempt to foster Australian industrial design innovation in the face of the widespread Australian practice of copying from abroad or of manufacturing ‘under license’. In launching the first *Sebel Design Award* in 1967 the company director recognised this:

> Australian history has shown that Australians once enjoyed a reputation for inventiveness and resourcefulness in these [industrial design-related] fields. Today it is a sad but inescapable fact that Australia is not only failing to sell its products, but is also gaining a reputation for copying the products of other countries. Reliance on this, and manufacturing under license has short-term economic value only.³

Harry Sebel, manufacturer and sponsor of the prize admitted his company’s own failings in manufacturing under license instead of nurturing local industrial designers.

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²Ibid., p. 8.

³‘Sebel Design Award 1967.’ *Design Australia* vol. 1, no. 1, April/May (1967). p. 46.
His company, he admitted, had often ‘taken the easy way out’ and manufactured under license. While this practice had some advantages, (he claimed: ‘You get know-how, results from big research programmes, and you work with a glamorous overseas name, perhaps’) there were also larger disadvantages in that the financial cost was huge - $46 million in the 1964-5 period was spent in Australia on paying royalties and copyright to international designers. In addition to this, extra money went overseas to pay for importing specialised materials and equipment. When the Australian company eventually did manufacture the foreign product, it could not export the product under the terms of the original designer’s copyright. Sebel’s final reason for wishing to promote local design was that he questioned whether in fact the imported design idea was suitable for Australian needs in the first place.

The objects of the *Award* were outlined as:

(a) to encourage the acceptance of good industrial design by the Australian general public.  
(b) to help obtain recognition by industrialists and other commercial interests of the work of established, as well as recently trained and student designers.  
(c) to create interest by potentially talented young men and women in Industrial Design as a worthwhile profession.4

The winner of the first, 1967, *Sebel Design Award* was Jerry Arnott for his *Auto Zoom Movie Camera*, possibly the first movie camera made in Australia.

**Case study - The Inventors: National Award for Inventors, 1971.**

The Australian public’s enthusiasm for the back-yard inventor was reflected in popular presentations of design issues in the mass media. The ABC’s popular television program *The Inventors* launched several new products including the *Swirl-on* hose attachment and Decor’s range of plastic kitchenware. The program also supported a new prize for inventors. The prize, *National Award for Inventors*, was inaugurated by John Lysaght (Australia) to commemorate 50 years of manufacturing galvanised sheet steel and coil. The award was also supported by the Inventors’ Association and the IDCA, and was to be bestowed upon the: ‘person or persons responsible for an invention which is likely to lead to improvements in the Australian

4Ibid., p. 40.
way of life, directly or indirectly. Industrial design products in the fields of transportation, consumer products, furniture, building, machinery, communications were all eligible.

What other manufacturers or associations will continue this proud tradition of supporting and advancing Australian Industrial Design?

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