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Sacred objects – Australian design and national celebrations

Whenever there is a national event or celebration in Australia, favourite sporting heroes (including race horses), celebrated artists and the nation’s ‘design icons’ are rolled out in the popular media to confirm a very specific view of Australian ‘white male’ national identity. Three very different types of writings about Australian industrial design are contrasted and two questions are explored: Is there a national design sensibility? Should there be an attempt to create a national canon of design?

1988 Reflections: the Bicentennial and the desperate search to find an Australian design style.

Throughout much of nineteenth and twentieth century history, the history of Australian industrial design has been interwoven with nationalist and gendered constructions of the Australian national identity. These myths largely argued for an identity based on male, practical, ‘no fuss’ inventors, and largely located them in rural Australia. The design objects celebrated are specific to the outback. Ford and Holden ‘utes’ (light pick-up trucks), the Stump-jump plough, Sunshine harvester, the Furphy water tank (agricultural equipment) and the Coolgardie meat safe (an early form of evaporative refrigeration) are endlessly celebrated as examples of uniquely Australian design. Also celebrated is the Hills Hoist, a rotary clothesline which inhabits the quarter-acre of parched grass which surrounds most domestic Australian architecture, although its symbolic value is quite different than the aforementioned rural design objects.

Design objects have long been used to evidence the ‘inventiveness’ of the Australian people. First there was C. E. W. Bean’s 1909 assessment of the national ability to innovate1, Manning Clark’s musings on the rural Australian’s ability to improvise2 and Russel Ward’s location of the Australian national character in the practical bushman.3 These important early scholarly writings

1 ‘It is still a quality of the Australian that he can make something out of nothing...It has long since become a part of his character, the most valuable part of it.’ C. E. W. Bean, quoted in A. Towle (ed.) Made in Australia, A source book of all things Australia, William Heinemann, 1986, p. 10.
and others have helped shape the way Australian national identity, and by implication industrial
design, has been written about and is still popularly perceived in Australia. Australians love to
think of themselves as capable, inventive, out-of-doors types! More recent scholarly accounts of
design activity in Australia have been few in number, and have had less impact upon the public’s
collective self-image. Tony Fry’s book *Design History Australia* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger,
1988), was the first specialist book on the subject of industrial design activity in Australia, and a
full decade was to pass before another, Michael Bogle’s *Design in Australia: 1880-1970* (North
Ryde, NSW: Craftsman House, 1998), joined it. Anne-Marie Willis’ important text *Illusions of
Identity: the Art of Nation* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1983), is much used in Australian
universities and surveys the role played by art and design and the national economy within the
constructions of national identity in Australia. Four texts linked to exhibitions at Australian State
galleries also covered industrial design issues within a general survey of art and architecture
(writers included Roger Butler, Robert Renew, Judith O’Callaghan and Simon Plant). In the late
1980s and 1990s, these books were been joined by journal articles on the subject by writers
including Peter McNeil, Ann Moyal and Jan Todd. This all amounts to small body of scholarship
when contrasted with the publications devoted to the design of other, longer established design
cultures. Australian industrial designers have been even more reticent to pen their own
perspectives on their discipline. *Gordon Andrews: a Designer’s Life* (Sydney: New South Wales
University Press 1993) and *Fred Lowen: Dunera Boy, Furniture Designer, Artist* (Castlemaine:
Prendergast Publishing 2000) are the only first-hand accounts published.

‘Popular’ writing about local industrial design, however, greatly increased in the lead up to the
1988 Australian Bicentenary as Australians looked to all areas of their cultural history
(architecture, music, literature, the fine arts and design) to find material for the further
development of their national identity. Generally, popular ‘writings’ in the mainstream press are
‘celebratory’, while the writings from the design industry itself have been ‘promotional’ in style.
These writings, while purporting to be historical accounts or critiques of design objects, are often
little short of product endorsements. They remain, however, a sizeable body of text in an
otherwise small number of materials which have directly addressed the subject, and reflect broad
popular understandings and misunderstandings of industrial design and the Australian national
identity. In the spirit of Adrian Forty’s ‘common object’ model of approaching design history,
‘popular’ views on the subject also need to be taken into account.4

Bicentennial writings gave rise to what can be termed a national delusion – a series of what I have identified as ‘design myths’ beloved by Australians, but which have no real evidence in fact. These myths include: that Australians are a ‘rural’ pioneering people who are inventors and improvisers and can ‘battle against the odds’; that Australian design got off ‘to a bad start’ because the nation lacks a crafts’ tradition; and that the only ‘real’ inventors in Australia are of British origin.

Tony Fry has described much Australian writing about industrial design as ‘celebratory...or promotional rhetoric.’ He believed this tendency increased in the lead up to 1988 and wrote:

> The area being examined [the construction of a history of industrial design in Australia] is still in a fluid state and in a process of being reworked. In addition, design exhibitions associated, for instance, with the Bicentenary are mounted within the frame of connoisseurship, to elevate the regard in which Australian-designed and made products are held. Such developments cannot be separated from the canonisation of Australian designers and the seeking of a ‘national identity.’

Fry was correct. Many attempts were made leading up to and during the 1988 celebrations to find an ‘Australian style’ or sensibility in all areas of cultural activity, including industrial design. It is rather sobering, however, that the ‘rural’, pioneer, white male constructs of the Australian national identity were *still* promoted by the Australian popular media and as recently as this. Are we really all still bushmen? It is also telling that ‘rural’ industrial design objects helped form this national identity (all of the agricultural equipment), while ‘urban’ or domestic consumer goods were ignored.

Many examples can be cited. In the lead up to 1988 celebrations, a list of ‘Aussie icons’ appeared in a special issue of *The National Times Colour Magazine*. Entitled ‘Designing Australia: Towards a National Style’, the articles and advertisements in this publication reflected well the growing patriotism which was to fully develop during the Bicentennial year itself. The writer of the introduction to this publication recognised the lack of a national industrial design ‘aesthetic’ or ‘appearance’, but waxed lyrical about what he believed was the Australian industrial design trait: ‘In...industrial design, work is not recognisably Australian in style but qualities of *inventiveness* and *ingenuity* are coming to the fore.’ (my emphases) This tendency to

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6 ‘Designing Australia: Towards a National Style’, *The National Times*, April 15 1983, p. 3.
Ascribe these values to Australian industrial design activity lies at the core of all Australian
design myths. It also characterises all the Bicentennial writings on industrial design and writings
on the Australian national identity itself.

Several Bicentennial publications drew upon the familiar words: ‘Give an Australian a piece of
wire and a pair of pliers and he’ll invent something.’\textsuperscript{7} It is amazing how often this claim was
made and by how many writers! All sought to locate the Australian national identity in the bush,
which is where historian Russel Ward originally began his search several decades earlier. The
elevation of Australian design objects to the level formerly reserved for sporting heroes,
explorers and race-horses was achieved in many celebratory publications. Peter Luck’s book
\textit{Australian Icons: Things That Make Us What We Are} is a typical example of the Bicentennial
genre.\textsuperscript{8} The book included a predictable choice of design objects with which all Australians are
familiar: the Stump-jump plough, Sunshine Harvester, Hills Hoist and Victa lawn mower. These
joined other established Australian ‘symbols’ including race horse Phar Lap’s heart, Don
Bradman’s cricket bat, Ned Kelly’s steel armour and Dame Edna’s spectacles. This book was
one of dozens published around 1988 which celebrated Australian objects and was intended to
reassure Australians they were innovative (and sporting, rebellious and humorous) as a people.

One might have thought this view of Australian industrial design would diminish after the
Bicentennial celebrations drew to a close, but it did not and subsequent ‘popular’ writings about
industrial design continued in a very similar manner. An example of this was January 1994’s
issue of \textit{The Bulletin} which had a lead story entitled ‘National Treasures - Best of the Bunch’. It
contained yet another celebration of the inventiveness of Australia’s pioneering days.

In all of these ‘celebratory’ publications, the design objects which appear most often as symbols
of national identity are the ‘rural’ Stump-jump plough, Sunshine harvester, Coolgardie safe, Ford
ute, and the ‘suburban’ Hills Hoist and Victa Mower. Indeed these industrial design objects have
appeared in all of the (few) books on Australian innovation and design.\textsuperscript{9} Terence Measham,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{7} B. Carroll ‘Australia: Land of Innovation’, in T. Wilson (ed.) \textit{Australia’s Best - A Digest of Australian
Achievement}, Trevor Wilson Publishing for the Australian Design Council and the Advance Australia
Foundation, 1988, p. 113.
\item \textsuperscript{8} P. Luck, \textit{Australian Icons: Things That Make Us What We Are}, William Heinemann, 1988.
\item \textsuperscript{9} For example, Ron Cull’s book features a Victa mower, Hills Hoist, Ford ute and ‘Sunshine’ harvester on
its cover, and is typical of many Australian publications which uses the ‘pioneering’ or ‘rural’ term
\end{itemize}
Director of the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney, has recently lamented that the Australian public’s interest in industrial design begins and ends with the clichés:

When we were planning the exhibition [Success and innovation: achieving for Australia, 1993] I would frequently mention the idea to people, particularly if I thought that they had access to funds which we could tap into. Often my news was met with a good-natured response, but one that disappointed me. ‘Ah yes!’ people would beam, ‘the Hills Hoist, the stump-jump plough!’ The history of innovation in Australia did not stop with the Hills Hoist...

Instead, Measham and Renew’s attempt to chronicle the successful development of Australian innovation considered several recent examples of Australian innovation which have never been popularly celebrated in this country. These included: BHP’s ‘Presto end’ soft drink can, Arthur Bishop’s variable-ratio rack and pinion steering system for cars (on which over 300 patents have been taken out world-wide), various energy-saving devices (solar panels for water heating, toilet cisterns for saving water) and other useful industrial design ideas which have been embraced by manufacturers throughout the world. Of these, the Cochlear ‘bionic ear’ implant alone has received some exposure in the popular press and might be capable of carrying a new national identity - ‘Australians as a hi-tech people’ perhaps. Yet, apart from this one example, few of these other recent designs are known or celebrated by Australians.

While agricultural implements from the 19th century have been proudly proclaimed ‘Aussie icons’ by most Australians, Measham and Renew listed other agricultural implements developed more recently with which few would be familiar. The Toft cane harvester is an example of such unrecognised industrial design activity. It was introduced in the early 1960s and replaced much of the heavy physical manual labour involved in cane cutting in Queensland. This example of recent Australian industrial design is exported to Cuba, Mexico and even the ‘centre’ design culture, America, and yet it is not publicly celebrated here.

In order to be recognised and valued by the general population (and so incorporated into the national identity), it would seem a design object has to create a link with Australia’s beloved pioneering era.


The myth of ‘pioneering innovation.’

The legacy of pioneering innovation, the general Australian myth has argued, in some way informed subsequent Australian design and innovation. Why is this sense of origin so dearly held? It could be explained by the fact Australia’s pioneering period is only a few generations past, whereas most other Western industrialised countries against whom Australians compare themselves have long passed their pioneering phases. Another reason might be that circumstances have encouraged Australians to be conspicuously innovative only in some eras, and so Australia’s pioneering days seem to shine out as a golden age of creativity. In early colonial times, geographical isolation meant Australians were forced to make objects themselves or adapt imported products to suit local needs. Severe economic downturns, such as the Great Depression of the 1930s, again forced Australians to innovate and cobble together objects to meet their needs. Other periods of isolation included the years of the two world wars when Australians did indeed engage in significant amounts of industrial design activity.

Conversely, circumstances have also conspired against design and manufacturing in Australia. The various Empire and Commonwealth trading schemes and then, since the 1960s, trade with Japan, locked Australia into a continuing exchange of raw materials for imported manufactured goods. It was thus no wonder that Australia’s pioneering legacy of innovative manufacturing was, and remains, a jealously guarded part of the national identity.

The Australian perspective on industrial design through the pioneering era has been a major difficulty for a true understanding of design activity. This paper argues for the recovery of the urban perspective, lost for many years by Australian art and architectural history, and only now being recovered. The myth that Australian economic activity was ‘rural’ (agrarian, pastoral and farmyard and dairy), and industrialised only after WWII when first contact was made with American culture, is dispelled by statistics showing Australians have always been the most suburban of peoples and that more have worked in city factories than on the land. Further, Australia did not industrialise only after WWII. The strong legacy of 19th century ‘arts and crafts’ and technical education in Mechanics’ Institutes and Schools of Art, a long history of manufacturing activity and an equally long process of Americanisation makes this notion false. While Australia’s industrial capacity increased greatly (fourfold) after WWII, this paper argues this was a continuation of activities occurring a century beforehand, and was not, as the
watershed theory would have it, a *beginning* of industrial design and manufacturing (and Americanisation) in this country.

While Australians have long boasted they are great innovators, in fact they have seldom been able to market their innovations. Commercially successful Australian products have been fewer in number than those of other comparable countries which were constantly set as models for Australian industrial design and manufacturing in the post-WWII era. Sweden, Denmark and Switzerland (and to a lesser extent Norway and Finland), have populations which are all significantly smaller than Australia’s and yet they have become identifiable as dynamic design cultures. Many other countries have fewer natural mineral resources (again, the Scandinavian countries and Japan) and yet they have managed to design, manufacture and export consumer goods to all world markets. Historian Ann Moyal questioned the myth of Australian innovation on the eve of the Bicentennial celebrations and reflected that:

> Australia confronts us with a paradox. It is widely asserted that Australians are a highly inventive people - give an Australian a piece of wire and a pair of pliers and he will invent something. Yet there is mounting evidence that, as a country, Australians rate very low on the world scale of industrial innovation; their manufacturing base is weak, historically and contemporaneously Australians derive much of their industrial development from imported technology and processes, and Australians are having immense difficulty in even so much as lifting off the ground to enter the high technology stakes.\(^\text{11}\)

**Roughness as a virtue.**

Russel Ward’s description of the typical Australian who was ‘...ever willing ‘to have a go’ at anything but willing too to be content with a task done in a way that was ‘near enough’...’\(^\text{12}\) may well have led to a national pride in shoddy locally-designed and manufactured objects. Many subsequent Australian male writers have referred to ‘rough and ready’ local designs with a certain measure of pride, as if this characteristic in some way attested to their masculinity. One rather startling example of this appeared in a 1983 article entitled ‘Product Designers Tame Their Rough Inventions’ by John Holt. Holt called upon the Australian pioneering tradition of bush


innovation and also upon another dearly-held aspect of Australian culture - the egalitarianism and pragmatism of ‘the Australian Way of Life’. Holt argued that an Australian sensibility would soon become apparent in Australian-designed products as a result of time, established traditions and markets and, surprisingly, a lack of research and development money:

Australian design cannot resemble European or American design - nor that of Japan, the product of consensus. Our design has to be for everyone, and done on a shoestring. It is democratic and pragmatic, utilitarian and egalitarian. Australian design is rather knock-about in character - there is not always the time or money for smoothing the rough edges - with few concessions to self-conscious decoration. Even in the best Australian-designed products, there is openness and directness.\(^{13}\)

Holt openly declared ‘roughness’ as a national design sensibility. The way in which this writer sought to make virtues of design imperfections (‘rough edges’) could not possibly help the cause of ‘good design’ in Australia, and yet many such ‘popular’ writings expressed this view. Other writings suggest that, rather that openness and directness, in fact Australians preferred glamour anyway.

**The love of ‘no fuss design’.**

In the search for a distinctive Australian industrial design sensibility, it is tempting to argue that Australians loved ‘no fuss design’. Indeed, if one word had to be cited as anathema to Australian design critics of the 1940s-1960s it would have to be ‘fuss’. An example of this can be seen in contemporary critical appraisals of Australian cars. Contemporary reviews of the first 1948 Holden stated the engine was ‘free from vibration and fuss’, while the car’s performance was described similarly - ‘it cruises without fuss’.\(^{14}\) In appearance, it was found by an Australian writer to be:

...very satisfying, easy to clean, and modern without being bulbous in outline. Chromium is restricted to the grille, which was neat and purposeful in shape, though perhaps a little larger than the connoisseur would prefer. Wide doors with low step-in height have concealed hinges on the

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leading edges, and the interior handles lift to open. Bumpers with large overriders are curved around the mudguards and are neat enough to appear part of the car.¹⁵

This description certainly matches a car lacking in fussy detail. There was no applied metal work or trim on the sides of the car so it was ‘easy to clean’ (American and British cars from this time had much more chrome by comparison), while concealed hinges and integrated bumpers gave a spare, and certainly not fussy, appearance. Yet despite its commendable lack of fuss, the gaudy FJ model Holden sold 169,969 cars while the original and more austere 48-215 (FX) model sold only 120,402.¹⁶ The FJ Holden began an Australian affair with chrome and fins on locally manufactured cars which suggested that, rather than simplicity, Australians seemed to enjoy decoration and ‘fuss’ in their consumer objects.

**Conclusion - Is there an Australian design sensibility?**

This paper began by asking perhaps the obvious questions for any study of the history of industrial design activity in Australia - is there a national sensibility? Should there be an attempt to create a national canon? The number of articles written on the subject during the Bicentennial celebrations suggests a desire on the part of the Australian people to create such a list. Despite this, Tony Fry wrote in 1988 ‘there is no Australian design’, by which he meant there was no national sensibility, no distinctive look. Fry conceded there had been considerable innovation in Australia, but did not believe enough industrial design objects existed to cobble together into a school that might resemble the distinctive British, American, Italian, French, German, Scandinavian or Japanese design cultures.

Earlier writers argued there was a ‘character’ which marked Australian industrial design objects. In 1956, industrial designer Ron Rosenfeldt had proposed ‘austerity’ as a defining characteristic.¹⁷ This description certainly seems to mark examples of early post-war Australian industrial design, the products made to satisfy a war-weary public who because of a scarcity of

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alternatives on the market would have accepted even the worst designed and manufactured objects. Was austerity, then, the defining characteristic of Australian industrial design? More recently, Terence Lane argued the many local attempts to ‘reproduce the effects’ of international furniture designs were characterised by a certain crudity caused by less sophisticated production processes - of plywood chairs with flatter profiles, of ‘Scandinavian-inspired’ local furniture made from less suitable local timbers. Was austerity, then, the defining characteristic of Australian industrial design?

This paper has suggested that the Australian public and popular design writers consciously responded to ‘rural’ themes in industrial design objects. Despite the fact it was without foundation as a reflection of Australians in this century (and especially by the time of the Australian Bicentennial celebrations) it was the ‘rural’ identity in industrial design which has been celebrated and carried the national identity while ‘suburban’ objects continue to be largely perceived as marginal. Early voices on a possible Australian cultural identity (Bean, Clark, Ward) led to the elevation of ‘rural’, practical, nation-building agricultural implements as national symbols. Conversely, post WWII academic rancour against what it saw as suburban mediocrity and materialism built up a perception of ‘suburban’ designs as metaphors for these supposed national ‘failings’.

Of all such ‘suburban’ design objects, the Hills Hoist outdoors clothes line has been most loved by the public and most ridiculed by the intelligentsia. Initially these clothes hoists were seen as wonderful space-saving designs. During the 1950s, however, the Hills Hoist in the suburban back-yard started to be used by social critics (artists, writers and intellectuals) as a symbol of mediocrity, and of the equation of mediocrity with the suburbs. By the early 1970s Hoists were widely regarded as ugly and many were replaced by the retractable clothes line. Advertisements even called upon Boyd’s Australian Ugliness in their criticism of the Hoist. In more recent times, the Hills Hoist has become an object of ironic celebration. Suburbia has been similarly

18 T. Lane, Terence. One Hundred Modern Chairs, National Gallery of Victoria, 1974. And Lane, Featherston Chairs, National Gallery of Victoria, 1988. passim.


saturated in Australian painting and literature. By contrast, ‘rural’ design objects have never been so lampooned. *In order to be recognised and valued by the general population (and so incorporated into the national identity), a design object has to create a link with Australia’s beloved pioneering era. Australian design, rural themes and white male achievements – the continuing trinity of our national identity*

The mythology of Australian industrial design has influenced the way Australians see themselves and has also had ramifications for the actual activity of industrial design practice in Australia. It is my belief that the pioneer mythology of ‘rough and ready’ Australian industrial design propagated by ‘popular’ writers has had a damaging effect on the industry. The design industry in Australia is clearly in trouble if it subscribes to the myth of ‘roughness as a virtue’ as was advocated by John Holt! The inability to capitalise on ideas, articulated by Ann Moyal, again stems from the Australian nostalgia for the creativity of its pioneering days and a national disregard for current design achievements. The Toft cane harvester, the ‘Presto end’ soft drink can, Bishop’s variable-ratio rack and pinion steering system and other design products deserve to be better known and celebrated by Australians.

Claude Levi-Strauss wrote ‘it may well be that a description of national character tells us more about the observer than the nation described.’ In other words, these Australian design myths, in fact, revealed much more about what Australian society wanted to be, rather than what it was. It has also been argued that ‘searchers’ already have an idea about what they’re searching for. This is very true of most histories of Australian industrial design activity which have sought to locate a defining character of ‘innovation’ in Australian manufactured goods, and have accordingly done so.

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22 Rickard has cited the example of Russel Ward’s desire to locate the national character in the Australian bush in his text *The Australian Legend*. Rickard wrote ‘Russel Ward’s celebration of the historian’s need for a ‘tolerable pair of boots’ suggests an image of the itinerant historian in search of the itinerant Bushman.’ See J. Rickard, ‘National Character and the ‘Typical Australian’: an Alternative to Russel Ward’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, no. 4, 1979, p. 12.
The end result of all these constructions of Australian national identity is that Australians have accepted a view of themselves in relation to design which the facts simply do not support. Australians are no more innovative than any other people. In fact, Humphrey McQueen\textsuperscript{23}, Stephen Alomes\textsuperscript{24}, Terry Smith\textsuperscript{25} and others have argued that Australians are rather less so - which probably explains the Australian fondness for re-telling the myths.

This paper has explored three very different types of writings to get a better sense of how Australian industrial design has been called upon to support images of national identity. The popular press has been largely celebratory, while the design industry has been uncritical and, understandably, self-serving in its chronicling of their design achievements. Challenging these, however, is a growing culture of design scholarship which has attempted to see the history of the nation’s creative endeavours in more even light.

