The current vogue for Scandinavian design recalls a time when an alternative taste first emerged to challenge the British and American hegemony of local design education, design practice and aesthetics.

In Australia in the 1950s and 1960s, a taste for Scandinavian design was evident everywhere: in the blonde and teak timber of local furniture and architectural detailing; in the organic forms of pottery and glassware; and in the strong, simple patterns of fabrics. This influence upon local designers was largely disseminated by articles on Scandinavian design by British writers in magazines and books. For example the British journal The Studio published a series of six articles, written by Scandinavians between 1931 and 1953 and so helped propagate an appreciation of Scandinavian craft and industrial design in many countries including Australia. The importance of The Studio in Australia cannot be doubted. Sydney Ure Smith, one of the great Australian art publishers, regarded the journal highly and it was found in many Australian libraries. In books, British writers Gordon Russell, David Jod, Anthony Bertram, Herbert Read and—the German-born—Nikolaus Pevsner were all, at some stage in their careers, enthusiastic about Scandinavian design and, again, these views were absorbed, often uncritically, by Australian designers.

For a lucky few Australian designers, this interest in Scandinavian design was inspired by first-hand travels to Scandinavia. Between 1962 and 1976, a remarkable series of exhibitions of Scandinavian design objects visited Australia. The Swedish government worked with Australian state art galleries to allow travelling exhibitions of consumer goods and produced publicity materials explaining the design profession. At least four major exhibitions showcasing industrial design from Scandinavian countries and Finland were held in Australia, travelling to most state art galleries: Design for living (1962), Design in Scandinavia (1968), Architecture in Finland (1973) and Adventure in Swedish glass (1976). These shows and the accompanying publications helped propagate the Scandinavian style in Australia.

**DESIGN FOR LIVING, 1962**

The Design for living exhibition was a survey of international consumer goods among which Scandinavian consumer goods were prominent. Held in 1962, the exhibition had an educational focus and was mounted jointly by the National Gallery of Victoria, the Council of Adult Education and the Education Department of Victoria. The exhibition toured all Australian state art galleries. According to NGV director Eric Westbrook, “The aim of this exhibition has been to show articles that...”
incorporate the principles of good design. All of them have been designed for domestic use. Eighty consumer products from twelve countries were displayed, of which twenty five were from Scandinavia or Finland.

It is arguable these exhibits of Scandinavian crafts and products of industry inspired in some commentators a response against industrialism. Surprisingly, Colin Barrie, director of the Industrial Design Council of Australia, expressed a crafts-based design sensibility as he wrote about the beauty and integrity of simple objects made by ancient civilisations:

This arose from the all-embracing nature of the process of production. The craftsman was the designer; he was also the master of his materials, for he prepared the raw materials of his trade and knew intimately the characteristics of those materials. He knew what he could achieve with the tools he used to turn the materials he handled into useful and beautiful objects. It is not surprising that such a unified production process resulted in goods of a satisfying wholeness, in a unity of visual and functional elements.

The unified production process admired by Barrie and which he evidently saw in the Scandinavian craft objects on display, is not a part of modern industrial design practice, where a division of labour occurs between industrial designer and manufacturer. Scandinavian craft-based design objects such as hand-made timber chairs offered an alternative to the mass-production of other countries. Finnish stoneware pottery by the Arabia company was particularly noted for this individuality and passion: ‘The bowls have the joy in creation and a violent urge towards artistic expression’ Finlands connections with nature were referred to in the catalogue essay: Finnish designs have a rugged individuality and honesty that match the country and its people. When Tapio Wirkkala, a sensitive artist in glass, ceramics, plywood and metal, was asked to name his country’s greatest designer, he replied simply, “Nature”.

This favouring of craft—and not of mass-production—seemed to be how Australians chose to view the Scandinavian contribution. The words ‘Scandinavian’ and ‘Swedish modern’ seemed to be used by local critics as synonymous with warmth, craft and humanity. Coupled with the opinions expressed by Barrie, a growing interest in a crafts-based design sensibility seemed to be taking hold in some quarters in Australian industrial design circles. Several commentators gave this exhibition of utilitarian domestic design objects high praise. Alan Warren, first head of industrial design at Melbourne Technical College and also the Sun newspaper art critic, wrote of the benefits such exhibitions of design could play in awakening the public to design in everyday life: ‘If an art gallery aims to dispel the idea that art is not confined to pictures on a wall, it starts to play a vital part in the community’.

**DESIGN IN SCANDINAVIA, 1968-69**

The exhibition Design in Scandinavia was staged six years late. Between February 1968 and January 1969 it travelled all over Australia visiting the Western Australian Art Gallery, the David Jones’ Art Gallery in Adelaide, the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the National Gallery of Victoria and the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. The introduction to the exhibition catalogue written by painter, graphic designer and director of the Art Gallery of NSW, Hal Missingham, explained the intentions of the show:

The decision to exhibit industrial design at the Australian State Galleries was some time ago decided in the interests of educating taste in the community in all its widest manifestations. We feel quite sure that this exhibition of the best
products of arts, crafts, and industrial design of the Scandinavian countries will not only demonstrate their undoubted creative abilities but will materially help our own country to progress in these fields.8

National identity was a strong theme in the exhibition. The catalogue essay forged a strong link between national identity and industrial design.9 It stressed the importance of the Scandinavian crafts tradition to Scandinavian industrial design. Finally, it gave a brief overview of Scandinavian design’s influence on international design:

By the 1930s, Swedish Modern was a world design centre. After WWII, Danish Design, especially in wood, came to exert a world influence. By the middle and end of the 1950s, Finnish glass and ceramics attracted world attention. In the early 1960s, Norway was seen to be a new, dominant furniture centre.10

Many of the Scandinavian companies with objects in the Design in Scandinavia exhibition had agents in Australia and these were thus available for sale to the public through retail outlets.11

Critic Patrick McCaughey’s review of the Design in Scandinavia exhibition emphasised several themes: Scandinavian naturalness; Scandinavia’s role as an arbiter of taste; Scandinavia’s quality beyond functionalism; its human comfort and ‘humanness’; the legacy of its crafts tradition; its lack of engagement with mere fashion. McCaughey noted the Scandinavian position as world arbiters of taste:

Scandinavian design provides us with our most powerful image of the good life. Sitting at your natural wood table in your streamlined chair, buttering your bread with your handle-less Jacobsen knife, sipping your beer from a Boda glass and knocking the ash of your cigarette into an Orrefors ash tray would indeed make a hair-raising display of good taste. Just how securely the Scandinavians have become the arbiters and makers of domestic taste can be seen from the large exhibition, Design in Scandinavia, at the National Gallery of Victoria. What’s so interesting is the discovery that while much of it is good, little of it is surprising, indicating the success of the Scandinavian infiltration.12

McCaughey enthusiastically praised the relationship between the human body and the Scandinavian design object.13 But he claimed the strengths of Scandinavian industrial design went beyond mere functionalism—there was a ‘naturalness’ of the materials and forms that he found appealing. As with other writers, he held the Scandinavian crafts tradition responsible for much of the various products’ appeal.
The Scandinavian designer’s capacity to harness technology without becoming chillingly clinical represents one of their major coups. It points to the long and honourable craft tradition from which their post-war designers spring. Sometimes, as in the Norwegian pottery, a sense of sturdy peasant craft continues quite openly without being archly folksy.14

Norwegian ceramics on display demonstrated these values well. At a time when the American industrial design industry in particular was being accused by the design-moralists in Britain of ‘styling obsolescence’, the ceramics and Scandinavian industrial design in general, was considered by Patrick McCaughey to be ‘direct’ and ‘honest’. The exhibitions Architecture in Finland (1973) and Adventures in Swedish glass (1976), while of less relevance to furniture, were also influential for Australian designers. These exhibitions had a lasting legacy. As well as exposing Australian consumers and designers to what was perceived to be the best in international design, at around this time several Scandinavian design objects were acquired for the permanent collections of many Australian art galleries. For example, around 1968 the NGV purchased the following Scandinavian chairs: Hans Wegner’s Round chair; the ‘AX’ chair designed by Peter Hvidt and Orla Molgaard-Nielsen; Eero Saarinen’s ‘Tulip’ chair; and Arne Jacobsen’s ‘Swan’ chair.15

At a time when British design was either wallowing in nostalgic historical revivals or was itself looking to Scandinavia for its lead—the Festival of Britain style has to be considered indebted to Danish work, early German modernity was considered ‘cold’, and the American industrial design industry was being accused by design-moralists of ‘styling obsolescence’, Scandinavian industrial design seemed to offer a fresh alternative.

Contemporary Australian newspaper reports of the exhibitions repeatedly used the favourable assessments: that the design on display was ‘direct’ and ‘honest’ and contained ‘warmth’ and ‘humanity’. However, the majority of Australian craftspeople and designers did not aspire to emulate the Scandinavians in their expertise with stainless steel and glass, but instead with textiles, timbers, and ceramics. A renewed interest in the crafts in Australia was soon to boom, perhaps at the expense of mass-production industrial design techniques and materials.

NOTES


9. "Show me the possessions, and I will show you the man." This variation of an old saying is sometimes quoted in Scandinavia when discussing the furnishing of private homes or public environments. One could also extend this to read: "Show me the products, and I will show you the country". Ibid., p. 8.

10. Ibid., p. 10.

11. In Melbourne the following agents supplied Scandinavian goods to retailers and the general public: Danish Design Agency, Dudley Street, agents for a wide variety of furniture from Norway; Forum Pty Ltd, Southern Cross Hotel, agents for a wide variety of ceramics from Denmark; Stevenson, Davies Pty Ltd, Clayton agents for a wide variety of furniture from Sweden. In Sydney several more agents handled Scandinavian consumer goods: Artes Studios, George Street, agents for a wide variety of furniture from Denmark and Norway; Danfield Pty Ltd, Crow's Nest, agents for a wide variety of ceramics from Denmark; Finnish Importing Co, Northbridge, agents for a wide variety of furniture from Denmark, Finland and Norway; Harland L Hogan & Son, George Street, agents for a wide variety of ceramics from Denmark; Incorporated Agencies Pty Ltd, Kent Street, agents for a wide variety of ceramics from Sweden and Finland; Messrs James L Hudson Pty Ltd, Clarence St., agents for a wide variety of ceramics from Denmark; Peter Marich & Co Pty Ltd, agents for a wide variety of ceramics from Norway; Uniek Import, Double Bay, agents for a wide variety of ceramics from Denmark. In Perth, Messrs Ahern Pty Ltd were agents for a wide variety of furniture from Denmark. In Brisbane, Messrs Lee, Monteith & Biggs Pty Ltd, Charlotte Street, agents for a wide variety of ceramics from Norway. Ibid., passim.


13. 'Simberg-Ehstrom's chaise-longue may have a stainless steel frame and base but its swooping curve proclaims a sensuous love of human comfort. The humanness of Scandinavian design reaches its high point in Yrjo Kukkapuro's chair whose back is as smooth and as svelte as Catherine Deneuve's if rather broader in the beam ... In other instances, such as the first-rate Iittala glass with its incised bases, the designers have retained the naturalness associated with craft work; as easy on the eye as to the hand and lip." Ibid., p. 10.
