Retrospect

The arrival of the Japanese

One of the great displays of industrial design products from all over the world was held at the Melbourne Exhibition Buildings between February 26 and March 14, 1959. Seventeen foreign countries brought their manufactured goods, raw materials and cultures generally before the Melbourne public. Participating countries were Australia, Austria, Ceylon, China, Denmark, France, Hong Kong, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, Norway, Pakistan, Poland, United Kingdom, Sweden, Switzerland, America and West Germany. In the absence of official world exhibitions (none were hosted in Australia between the late 19th century and the 1988 Brisbane World Expo) the Melbourne 1959 International Trade Fair, and the subsequent International Fairs in Melbourne and Sydney may be regarded in retrospect as ambitious undertakings at a time when Australia was strangely reluctant to present itself as an independent country at world exhibitions abroad.

The Australian Section at the 1959 International Trade Fair reflected the move away from reliance on traditional agricultural activities towards a greater emphasis on industrial design and manufacturing. The Anglo-Australian Engineering Co. featured rotary lawnmowers, Avion Products displayed all types of motorised and folding wheel chairs, while various retailers and manufacturers displayed furniture, chandeliers and lighting. Refrigeration, a technology where once Australia led the world, was displayed by Frigrite Limited. GM-H had a display, but chose to show American-designed Frigidaire kitchen appliances rather than any of its cars. The local Healing company, which participated in many such exhibitions, revealed the diversity of its business: refrigerators, heaters, air-conditioners and outboard motors. The English company Lucas revealed the variety of its Australian-made products (electrical equipment for cars and motorbikes, aircraft, switchgear, lighting and batteries) but few of these would actually have been designed in Australia. Local plastics companies Pope and Plastic Specialties showed many consumer goods which relied in some part on the new material: shoe heels, plastic trays, plastic thermometers, refrigerators, washing machines, television receivers, lawn mowers, lawn sprinklers, irrigation equipment and electric motors.

While Japanese goods had long been available to Australian consumers, 1959 marked the first Japanese representation at an Australian trade fair. A vast array of consumer goods was available for inspection promoted in Australia by a wide range of agents: domestic and professional electrical appliances, record players, tape recorders, some of the earliest transistor radios, televisions, electrical Toasters, fans, pots, cookers, and an equally vast range of cameras and photographic goods, slide and film projectors. Watches, clocks, tableware, crockery and cutlery, glassware, optical goods, binoculars, microscopes, opera glasses, reading glasses, engines, office equipment, scientific instruments, sewing machines, lamps and furniture were all displayed. All types of fountain and ball point pens were on show from the Pilot Pen Co., bicycles and parts, motor scooters, Nissan cars and trucks (the only vehicles on display), fishing rods and tackle complete an extensive list of consumer goods which would soon dominate the local market.

Previous trade fairs had been dominated by British and American manufacturing companies and to a lesser extent – those from Germany, Italy and the design-rich countries of Scandinavia. In its first participation at an Australian trade fair, Japan had the third highest number of manufactured goods on display and it dominated the electronics goods section. By any measure a new design culture was challenging the domination of the British and American design and manufacturing hegemony which had thus far dominated the Australian design scene and the Australian public’s buying trends.