

Modern Design and Traditional Techniques

When I researched for this training course, the name itself intrigued me very much, it seemed to be some kind of contradiction, or at least two very different concepts difficult to match.

I now see that the program is a learning experience and a challenge at the same time, understanding how craft and design can benefit from each other could be one of the most important questions it ask us. Craft respects tradition and specialization in a set of pre-established rules and puts emphasis on the creation of beautiful objects made by hand. Modern design looks at the future for inspiration, values innovation and makes heavy use of mass production to achieve a democratization of good design. But we can also have common ground in craft vs design, both have usefulness as a goal and are disciplines focused on improving people's lives through objects, both strive to find beautiful shapes and to come up with better and simpler solutions to functional problems.

In the end I come to the realization that we have to learn from each other and to find a real way to collaborate, which means that designers should view craft as a field of real and potential team work instead of as another method for production, collaboration means to have equal participation in the decision making process of design. I think these are the best conditions for coexistence and mutual benefit.

We designers have to learn to find value on the great knowledge and cultural importance of tradition and craftsmen have to understand that traditional techniques can be maintained for longer if given a contemporary approach and focus on looking for opportunities of innovation in the lifestyles of their modern market.

Craftsmanship in the Contemporary Context

One more questions that faces us in this course is: Why are traditional crafts and techniques important and why should design be interested in this field?

In first instance I think that craftsmanship is an important manifestation of cultural identity, it is a great way to convey the ideas of people who pertain to a certain group. Japanese culture can be easily approached by looking at the codes hidden in its objects by years of continuous replication and slow evolution, and the same could be said for any other culture.

So in this sense this course manages to fulfill two objectives: to showcase Japan through a media that is difficult to convey in words and to show how the efforts to maintain culture and identity against an impending globalization and modernization can sometimes be quite difficult and how extensive research, collaboration and participation from society and government is still needed in the effort to maintain cultural identity and improve economic conditions.

It is also known that craft production as an economic activity is very important for less technologically developed countries as it's the case of Mexico, and is also a reality that design as a tool for development is still not fully taken advantage of in Mexico either.

Also crafts possess a certain "spirit", when people invest their time and effort in creating a single object by hand it acquires an added value and a warmer character than objects produced in mass. In our modern society where there is less human interaction every time and where everything seems to be so immediate, craft offers a contact with humans that create this beautiful objects.

Design Research and Project

Urushi 漆 Lacquer ware or Shikki 漆器

Urushi or Shikki is a technique in which objects are coated using the sap of the *Toxicodendron Vernicifluum* or urushi tree, this sap is poisonous to the touch until it dries.

Lacquer ware can be found in many Asian countries and India, and is believed to have been used in Japan since the 7000 BC, during the Jomon period.

Nuri mono 塗り物 encompasses many different techniques to seal, protect and decorate objects. Inlay or metal powder can also be added to generate different effects in a technique known as maki-e 蒔絵.

Usually base objects are made from wood, paper, leather or weaved materials and then covered with Urushi.

My research during this training program focused during near to 5 months on learning different techniques of Urushi, the result of these learning is a series of objects, traditional and new coated on this precious lacquer material.

This practical exercises were done twice a week in sessions of around 8 hours a day for a period of 4 and a half months in the workshop of the Urushi Master Tadahiro Oya 忠弘 大家 with the assistance of 尚子 芦田.

Design Concept

The design concept of the project centers on the mix of two techniques or two traditions. In the case of the two techniques the intended approach was to combine new technologies with ancient traditions, so I used 3D modelling and 3D printing to create an asymmetrical shape that cannot be obtained through traditional use of a lathe, technique known in Japanese as hikimono 挽物.

The concept consist of set of a cup and a plate that can be used for either the Mexican or Japanese style of drinking alcoholic beverages. The cup can be used to drink tequila or mezcal and the plate for the salt and lime used on the Mexican custom of consuming these beverages. Or the cup can be used to drink Japanese nihonsu 日本酒, and the plate can be used for accompanying snacks in the style they are served in Izakaya 居酒屋. This cup and plate are 3D printed and then covered with Urushi lacquer.

For the mix of two traditions, Japanese lacquerware was combined with Mexican style traditional graphics. In the first case a かすみ目八角盆 Kazumi-me Hachi Kakubon plate was decorated with Mexican motifs using charcoal powder maki-e すみこまきえ.

In the second exercise a Hagoita wooden paddle was decorated in silver, gold and pewter maki-e using also a Mexican inspired decoration.

For a third exercise, a Kyoto made bamboo 竹 plate was decorated with Urushi in more contemporary colors and patterns.

Conclusions

When you visit Japan and experience its many contrasts, is clear why so many people become enchanted by its natural beauty, culture and traditions. It's a very difficult place to understand for a foreigner, and it would take many more visits and experiences to get at least a glimpse of understanding of the mystery that this little and wonderful archipelago is for the outside world.

The magnetism that this "other world" has over so many people (including myself) resides on its differences, its singularity. As designers we always look for innovation and ways of differentiating ourselves from the many options offered by modernity and mass production. Japanese craft has a

modest beauty, a kind of quiet and calm aesthetic, it doesn't scream its message to the user, it whispers it with subtlety. This beauty of silence and modesty is absolutely essential to the Japanese character and is very difficult to understand coming from a country with values that sometimes might seem to completely opposite. But I do believe that the clash of black and white can create many shades of gray and that in this middle ground there is also a lot of beauty to be found.

I go back to Mexico learning a lot from a country that is so far away from mine, in distance, history and culture and yet I feel there is so much I can relate to, as an example we face many of the same challenges in craftsmanship, although at different scales. But I think that the approaches and experiences learned through this program will be of great use in changing the way we think about the difficult relationship between design and craftwork in the 21st century. Is through humans doing things by hand that we have come so far in technology in modern societies and there is still much to learn and to be preserved from the many marvelous manifestations of the human soul executed through handcrafted objects.