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Wallpaper Tiger: The Florence Broadhurst Collection and the Questions of Cultural Appropriation in Design.

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Introduction

In 1959, Sydney-based textile designer Florence Broadhurst, also known as ‘*Madame Pellier*,’ emerged on the design scene with a collection of prints inspired by Japanese motifs. Amongst these motifs were Art Nouveau and Art Deco swirls; abstract weaves and traditional tapestry designs, which the Sydney scene then considered revolutionary. With a team of young designers and screen printers at her side, Broadhurst set up a studio in the heart of avant-garde Paddington and began producing her lavish, bold coloured creations. These eclectic prints were featured heavily in wallpaper and interior furnishings and introduced the Australian post-war consumer to her vibrant geometric patterns and valiant colour plans. Eighteen years later, it seemed mysterious then, that Florence Broadhurst would be murdered where no motive was suggested and no perpetrator discovered. In the 90s, David Lennie, salvaged the Broadhurst prints under copyright of his screen-printing company *Signature Prints*. Since then, though the murder remains unsolved, the revival of Broadhurst’s designs as part of Sydney’s burgeoning interiors scene has prompted much speculation into the methods she originally adopted in her artistic process.

If one examines the cultural debates around textile design and cultural appropriation, one is faced with a choice; either to accept the concept that appropriation belongs to a series of mechanisms that include the assimilation and incorporation of *Other* materials or ‘signs’ into one’s own culture to enlarge, reinforce or exoticise, or to conclude that the *raison d’être* of the designer is that of aesthetic and social commentary.

Through investigation and debate, this paper will explore the design and cultural influences of Florence Broadhurst and the *Broadhurst Print Collection*, and question the issues around cultural appropriation, or ‘borrowed inspiration’. It will reflect on the boundaries between representational and non-representational,



abstract and figurative design that echo a kaleidoscopic mix of traditional practices and new inventions that ultimately sway in the murky waters of artistic licence, cultural transmission and power relations.

This paper will also consider the multiple ways in which Florence Broadhurst consumed and rearticulated her own political agenda's dominant signs; from the discourses of art history and Orientalism in general. By examining the diverse interplay between the complex processes of the appropriation, consumption and production of Broadhurst's designs, the aim of this paper is to examine and question the ambivalent nature of textiles and its production of meaning in cultural life.

Meaningful Presence

It was first estimated that the collection was made up of one hundred and twelve designs, but after documenting and cataloguing, *Signature Prints* discovered a great number of exceptional textile and artwork that made up Sydney's 60s and 70s design existence.

There are currently three features that make *The Florence Broadhurst Collection* unique; the sheer range of the collection, which is made up of five hundred and thirty original Broadhurst designs; the scale of the designs, which includes the large-sized motifs and florals; and the intricate hand rendering, hatching and detail within the designs themselves. To date, only thirty designs from *The Broadhurst Collection* have been released to the public (Gough Henly 2003: 25-27).

On closer inspection, one notices uniqueness in the design element of the prints and sees that the majority of the designs incorporate a textured background, which appears to change the dimension of the design itself. Lennie describes the process as a layering of textures, whereby fifteen textures were frequently used in the printing process from ninety percent background coverage to ten or twenty percent, or a combination of these, and then a more solid design printed over the top. Lennie points out:

"If you think clever with your colors, you can stand back and you have [a new] dimension. Now, no painted wall can do that. The textual effects, including large areas of hand drawn hatching [within the artwork], softens the artwork and allows the base color to infiltrate areas of the design, which then allows each area to merge with the other, thereby adding dimension." (Lennie cited by Clifton-Cunningham and Karaminas 2004).

The majority of *The Broadhurst Collection* comprises of hand rendered designs, which captures individuality, according to Lennie, "[It is] the hand drawn line [that] contains a soul" (Clifton-Cunningham and Karaminas 2004). The value of this was made certain when *Signature Prints* began to digitize a selection of the original Broadhurst designs, but stopped due to a problem within their art and design software program, which straightened the lines within the design. This gave the design a 'clinical feel' rather than one that contained 'spiritual and emotional qualities.' *Signature Prints* have since reverted to hand rendering techniques once again, which is an important aspect of the collection and which provides the large-scale designs with a life of their



own, thus enabling them to narrate an anecdote about the design origin, cultural influence and social commentary of the period.

Another feature of the collection was the mis-registration of the individual color separations within the design, or what Lennie (Clifton-Cunningham and Karaminas, 2004) refers to as “fucked up registration.” This has become a trademark of *The Florence Broadhurst Collection* and is considered an idiosyncratic feature within the design that allows the textile prints to communicate depth. There is no doubt that the facilities Broadhurst originally utilized in her screen-printing factory made the designs ‘mis-register’ and that Broadhurst herself was not opposed to its presence.

Florence Broadhurst was particularly proud of her choice of colors. She established very early in the conception of her business the need to introduce the Australian post war consumer to vibrant color. She believed the Australian taste to be conservative and found it difficult to persuade Australians to be more adventurous with color and harmony, as well as trying the effects of three dimensions, color vibration, metal papers and gloss foils. (Broadhurst cited in Signature Prints, 1975: 2)

The designs that featured within the collection were generally available in a broad selection of colorways, with the original color palette linking to the subject of the design. As the colorways for the design expanded, they often contained muted hues, which reflected the trend of the time.

Broadhurst worked with a team of designers (although in a Cinesound newsreel recorded for Channel Nine, she claimed that she did all the designing herself). Broadhurst also employed young graduate designers from art schools in Sydney. How much of the designer’s ‘own’ inspiration and interpretation was included in the design process?

Within the vast collection there are many different styles of handwriting and the actual initials of the designer, or artist can also be detected. Because the designs were modified, with consideration given to the fact that they would feature on a wall, scale was often manipulated with the addition of textural effects to add dimension to the two dimensional printed surface. Design repeat systems comprising of a four-sided repeat was also included so the design could carry itself over an entire wall of any size (Lennie cited by Clifton-Cunningham and Karaminas 2004) Could all these agents also have played a role in changing the meaning of the design?

In many ways, Florence Broadhurst was an Art Director, rather than a designer. Lennie compared her to Enid Blyton, “Enid Blyton supposedly wrote a hell of a lot of books and had also a hell of a lot of shadow writers. Her job was to keep the level of excellence to a point” (Lennie cited by Clifton-Cunningham and Karaminas 2004)

The volume of design prints that Florence Broadhurst produced may have been encouraged by the amount of commissioned work she claims she received on her travels overseas. These “successful selling visits” where “subsequent orders poured in and I [then] realized that I had accidentally tapped a highly lucrative overseas



market” included a commission to print a “special design for Qantas premises around the world,” and a special design for Estée Lauder cosmetics (Broadhurst cited by Signature Prints 1975:7).

David Lennie comments, “A lot of the design work comes from the brief that you are asked to develop. Libraries evolve from what the marketplace wants, there is absolutely no way that she could [have drawn] every single design” (Clifton-Cunningham and Karaminas 2004).

Meaning and Translation: Belonging ‘elsewhere’

Broadhurst’s designs appear as a taxonomy worthy of Borges’ ‘Chinese Encyclopedia’: (1) geometrics; (2) florals (small and large scaled); (3) stripes (45 and 90 degrees); (4) trellis (bamboo and tortoiseshell); (5) tapestries; (6) textures; (7) Orientals.

The ‘gathering’ of motifs and symbols by Broadhurst; the assemblage of ‘Other’ ‘worlds’ reflect wider cultural rules; of taxonomy, of gender, of aesthetics and of power. This need to collect, to *have* is transformed into desire to possess, to select, order and classify into hierarchies of ‘collections.’



Figure 1: Florence Broadhurst, *Japanese Fan*.

Courtesy Signature Prints: The Florence Broadhurst Collection.



Figure 2: Florence Broadhurst, *Japanese bamboo*.
Courtesy Signature Prints: The Florence Broadhurst Collection.

The motifs that appear in *The Broadhurst Collection*, comprise of ‘*Persian Birds*’ [fig.5], ‘*Japanese Fans*’ [fig.1] and ‘*Japanese Bamboo*’ [fig.2] designs as well as Chinese chrysanthemums, tigers, peaches and cranes [fig.3]. The choice of themes go back to Central Asian symbolism and religious iconography and in this sense its taxonomic, aesthetic structure is valued as ‘*different*’ and ‘*exotic*’ in opposition to the “Australian taste of décor at the time which tended to be flat in color and conservative” (Broadhurst cited by Clifton-Cunningham and Karaminas 1975:1). So the designs themselves become negatively marked as objects of inspiration whose various “levels of meaning applied through social and historical relations cease[d] and [went] beyond and out of context of their original cultural significance” (Van de Ven cited by Clifton-Cunningham and Karaminas 2004)

“The chrysanthemum that appears in the ‘*Chelsea*’ [fig.7] design”, states Australian designer Akira Isogawa “defines a particular ‘season’. Whether the traditional meaning changes or alters, depends on one’s attitude regardless of the object. For me,” he says, “the meaning remains the same” (Clifton-Cunningham, 2004).



Figure 3: Florence Broadhurst, *Cranes*.

Courtesy Signature Prints: The Florence Broadhurst Collection.

Peacock [fig.4]. *Cranes* [fig.3]. These, rather than the familiar chrysanthemum, were the emblems of the early Japanese sovereigns. The ancient court history describes their depiction on the banners of the Emperor Mommu in the year 701, and as such they are the most explicit early examples of fixed designs used as a symbol of a person and status in Japan. The *Scroll of the Mongol Invasion*, a thirteenth century pictorial account of battles, includes one of the most intricate of Japanese heraldic crests - a circle enclosing the traditionally auspicious symbols for longevity - the crane, the bamboo and plum blossom [depicted in fig.3]. The crane symbolized a thousand years of life. The plum blossom is a traditional symbol of fortitude in all of Asia, for it “braves the lingering chill of winter to bloom before all the other flowers” (Dower 1995:15) Together with the bamboo, the plum blossom is known as one of the ‘three companions of the cold’. The bamboo, symbol of resiliency, was also associated with longevity in Chinese legend, which held that the phoenix (peacock), bird of immortality, dined on bamboo. In a sense, the above motifs utilized by Broadhurst have become objects of appropriation; stimulated, adapted, corrupted, though not necessarily in that order.

Appropriation, argues Shand, “is a mode of cultural engagement that is dependent on the ability to separate a given object or design from its cultural milieu for the purpose of its employment in a different form. It is predicated on formalist assumptions as to the recognition and meaning of cultural heritage” (Shand 2002:5). For example, the inclusion of the peacock, or the crane, as part of a general Broadhurst design betrays a reduction, isolation, and re-designation of a cultural specific design.



On Longing

Susan Stewart's study *On Longing* explores the gap that separates language from the experience it encodes by exploring certain recurrent strategies pursued by the West since the sixteenth century. Paralleling Marx's account of the fetishistic objectification of commodities, Stewart argues that in "the modern museum [the collections] are an illusion of a relation between things [which] take the place of social relation" (Stewart cited by Clifford, J, 1993:53) She shows how collections create the illusion of representation of a world by removing objects, in this case motifs, out of specific contexts (whether cultural, social, historical or political) and making them represent abstract wholes. '*Japanese Bamboo*' [fig.2] or '*Japanese Fans*' [fig.1], in this case, becomes an ethnographic metonym for Japanese culture. A system of classification is then put into place for the coding and marketing purposes of the design itself, which then overrides specific histories of the motifs' iconographic symbolism and its appropriation. The objective world is given, not produced, and thus historical relations of power are occulted. The making of meaning in the Broadhurst Collection, is mystified and mythologized as 'inspiration' eclipsing the act of "appropriation, or direct translation" (Van de Ven, cited by Clifton-Cunningham and Karaminas 2004). The order and taxonomy of the collection overrides and deletes the multiple meanings of tradition and history that are attached to Japanese, Chinese and Persian sacred symbols of time, place, belonging and identity.

James Clifford's seminal paper '*On Collecting Art and Culture*' argues that the history of collections [in the West] (not limited to museums) is central to an understanding of how those social groups that invented anthropology and modern art [or modern design] have appropriated exotic things, facts, and meanings (Clifford, 1993). It is important to analyze how Broadhurst's designs made at a particular moment in the Australian contemporary social fabric circulate and make sense within the broader context of Australian identity and selfhood.

What criterion validates 'good' and 'bad' design? What ethical and political criterion distinguishes between different historical moments and at specific historical conditions? Does the appropriation, inspiration and inevitable exoticization of aspects of design come from the designers themselves, or "from the multiple meanings that the consumer puts on the pattern?" (Van de Van cited by Clifton-Cunningham and Karaminas 2004).

The critical history of 'collections' states ethnographer James Clifford, "is concerned with what from the material world specific groups and individuals choose to preserve, value and exchange" (Clifford 1993:62) Similarly, although this is a complex history of European Imperialism, one that reaches back to at least the 'Golden Age of Discovery' [sic] in the history of European colonization, Baudrillard provides a framework for the consumption of artifacts in the recent capitalist West. In his account, all categories of meaningful objects function within a system of symbols and values.



Figure 4: Florence Broadhurst, *Exotic Birds*.

Courtesy Signature Prints: The Florence Broadhurst Collection.

Take for example Broadhurst's '*Exotic Birds*' [fig. 4] whose figurative pattern was also used in Persian art. Mostly allegorical, it has symbolic significance prevalent in Persian arts, such as book illustration, mural decoration, pottery textile, etc.

Oriental fascinations

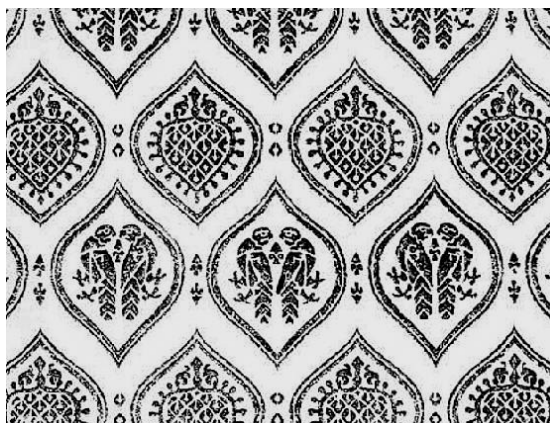


Figure 5: Florence Broadhurst, *Persian Birds*.

Courtesy Signature Prints: The Florence Broadhurst Collection.

Broadhurst's successive 'Oriental fascinations' represent a curious blend of restraint and theatricality. This combination can certainly be found in '*Persian Birds*' [fig.5]. Her use of ill-defined flat backgrounds and her handling of space, compositional devices, perspective and color were profoundly influenced by Japanese art.



Although she traveled broadly through Asia, from India across to East Asia, to China and possibly Japan from the late 1910's to the 1920's, "one could suggest [Broadhurst] picked up inspiration in those countries, or there is a word to consider 'plagiarism'. Inspiration, appropriation, plagiarism, where did Florence sit in terms of her designs?" (Van de Ven cited by Clifton-Cunnigham and Karaminas, 2004).

In general, the image of the peacock is a cross-cultural symbol and in many cultures and traditions, the peacock appears as a symbol of paradise, rebirth, the incorruptibility of the soul and a symbol of immortality. The bird is also a symbol for the story of the heavens and hence resurrection and everlasting life. In the East, it represents a symbol of rebirth in the mythology of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. In Hinduism, the image of the God of thunder, rains and war, Indra, was depicted in the form of a peacock. In India the peacock was also a symbol of love. The peacock is represented in numerous paintings, which depict love scenes. In Chinese and Japanese art, the peacock was a symbol of beauty and dignity and the benefactor of humanity. In Chinese symbolic patterns we see that parts of the body and tail, of a symbolic bird, such as the phoenix, were depicted in the form of a peacock.

The image of a peacock was found on a late sixth century or seventh century Sassanian mural decoration at Ctesiphone. The popularity of this motif in mosques and as a sacred object was due to its symbolic significance and became a symbol of beauty, paradise and the soul of humanity who wishes to return to their eternal home. According to one tradition, the prophet of Islam in his Ascension to heaven was carried on a Buraq, a being with the head of a man, the body of a horse and the tail of the peacock and this appears in many Moslem paintings.

The depiction of the peacock motif was extensively used on the walls of Persian religious buildings, such as the Shah's mosque and can be explained in two ways; as a symbol for the beauty of the Divine and as a motif referring to the soul of humanity who wishes to return to its eternal home. However, Broadhurst's peacock motif [fig. 4 and fig.5], through extensive commercialization, was utilized on her wallpaper designs and became a significant aspect of interior decoration in Australian middle-class homes in the sixties and seventies. Thus, one interpretation features the '*Persian Birds*' as religious iconography and the other as commercial enterprise. The moral evaluation of the two acts is sharply opposed, but the motif, in this case the peacock is still meaningful and ethereal. Commercial, aesthetic, and religious worth in both cases presupposed a given value system.

The use of the traditional peacock motif by Broadhurst circulates within a system of values and meanings that finds beauty in the collection of objects from the East; Orientalist collectors endow '*Chinoiserie*' and '*Japanisme*', with a sense of depth and longing. This 'Cult of the East', is so suffused with a yearning for transcultural inspiration that temporality is reified and salvaged as origin, beauty, and knowledge.

The Broadhurst Collection is a form of ethnography. Motifs are selected, gathered, detached from their original temporal occasions and given enduring value in a new arrangement. In doing so specific meanings are erased and cultural significance shifts and slides to the point that the appropriation of the motifs in the context of



patterns are equivalent to colonial occupation of Central and Northern Asian art and design. (Van de Van cited by Clifton-Cunningham and Karaminas, 2004). In this way, the sense that colonization is not a historical phase that has passed, the effects of which are known and finite, informs the arguments that Broadhurst was implicit in the process of cultural appropriation. Attracted to the potential for her work in Central and Northern Asian cultural heritage, she appropriated designs into her work and emulated styles. In this way, motifs and symbols are saved out of time from a complex historical narrative and structure and continuity becomes hybridized forms evoking a sense of dislocation and loss. “When I see her artwork,” [both Broadhurst’s ‘*Nagoya*’ fig.6 and ‘*Chelsea*’ fig.7 designs] stated Akira Isogawa, (which reminded him of traditional Japanese kimono textiles), “it gives me a feeling of being somewhere else, [like] the Far East, or somewhere exotic in another time” (Clifton-Cunningham, 2004).



Figure 6: Florence Broadhurst, *Nagoya*.

Courtesy Signature Prints: The Florence Broadhurst Collection.



Figure 7: Florence Broadhurst, *Chelsea*.

Courtesy Signature Prints: The Florence Broadhurst Collection.



Conclusion

Orientalist practices of art and design have situated themselves at the end of a global history. They have occupied a place; apocalyptic, progressive, revolutionary, or tragic; from which to gather the inheritances of modernity. They have created manias of taste and connoisseurship, copied, emulated, appropriated and constructed an imaginary 'Orient' to satisfy a Western vision of passive beauty and elegant refinement. Concretizing this temporal setup, Broadhurst's designs embody a fundamental position in the ethics and morality of design and in its trafficking of meaning. 'Persian Birds' [fig.5], 'Nagoya' [fig.6], 'Chelsea' [fig.7], 'Japanese Fans' [fig.1], 'Japanese Bamboo' [fig.2], to name but a few, all are survivals, remnants and appropriations of 'Other' traditions. The motifs appear in Broadhurst's designs as shreds of culture, captured commodities, vanishing into a one-dimensional fate.

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