Metamorphoses of Formalism: National Identity as a Recurrent Theme of Design in Greece

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The tension between tradition and modernity occupies a fundamental position in the history of the modern Greek state. The discourse on national identity and the concept of ‘Greekness’ has been central to this tension. Within this discourse, the design of locally produced objects has been endowed with a special national aura and products have been viewed as exemplars of idealized qualities. Throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, examples of local design production reflect the continuing presence of national identity concerns in the production of three-dimensional artefacts. Such examples illustrate the controversial influence that the issue of national identity has had on the development of design in Greece. I argue that the long-term obsession with Greekness has limited many design endeavours within the realm of formalism. This is further elaborated by suggesting a critical rethinking of design classifications along national lines. The concept of national identity is questioned and it is suggested that it obscures the depth and complexity of design historical processes.

Keywords: design—formalism—Greece—Greekness—national identity—nationalism

Since the formation of the independent Greek state in the 1830s, the institution of the state, together with other institutions imported from the West, had to operate in Greece within a certain system of collective representations and worldviews. This system, resulting from the country’s historical trajectory, was totally different from those in the countries of the European West. As in other peripheral countries, imported institutions constitute in Greece the object of an almost anxious treatment. They become idealized, perfect exemplars which have to be imitated and approached, an attitude which leads to strong cultural and ideological dependence from the original models, in this case from the West.¹ The feelings of insecurity regarding institutional underdevelopment may take many different guises. In Greece, these feelings have been primarily expressed by a long-standing, insistent, and often desperate quest for national identity.² It has been argued that this crisis of identity constitutes the central issue of the neohellenic society and the main axis around which modern Greek history has developed.³ The issue of national identity in general has been extensively examined and analysed with reference to various domains of cultural production, such as literature, music, theatre, fine arts and architecture.⁴ It is of course a very wide and vastly complicated issue, with ramifications in practically every aspect of Greek culture. In this paper, Greekness will be addressed specifically with regard to industrial design. Through textual and visual evidence, my analysis will explore the role and implications of national identity concerns in relation to design for mass production. I will attempt to follow the recurrence of the national identity theme in product design, trace its sources and point to some of its consequences.

The first signs of national identity concerns in connection with design had already appeared in the middle of the nineteenth century, when the young state was struggling first of all to exist, and then to assert
itself among the advanced countries of the European West. The issue of national identity had been a formative factor for Greek design with respect to the official Greek participation in the Great Exhibition of 1851, just two decades after the creation of the independent state. It is perhaps significant that the word ‘Greekness’ (‘Ελληνικότης: Helleniotis’) was introduced for the first time in 1851 and gradually became more widespread, although its exact meaning remained nebulous and open to various interpretations. It might perhaps be described as an intangible essence expressing the spirit of the Greek people. Nineteenth-century historians, especially Paparrigopoulos, were decisive in formulating the concept of the continuity of Greek civilization and its development through three distinct but interconnected periods: Antiquity, Byzantium and Modern Times. The rise of national historiography in the middle of that century ensured that these periods would be conceived and described as a coherent whole, whose youngest representatives were the modern Greeks themselves. This conception of Greekness was subsequently institutionalized and reproduced through various mechanisms, public education in particular, and was deeply internalized by Greek citizens. Of course the Greek state had a significant advantage in its attempt to shape a national identity: the availability of what Gellner terms ‘an old high culture’, the culture of ancient Greece. This old high culture had been an invaluable asset for the formation of the Greek state in the first place, and it was also crucial for attaining an early political sense of ethnicity. It may be argued, however, that the overemphasis on ancient glories and cultural achievements of the distant past acted as a stumbling block to the development of modern Greek culture. Already by the end of the nineteenth century, the French writer Théophile Gautier, having travelled extensively in Greece, observed: ‘In these classical lands, the past is so alive that it leaves hardly any space for the present to survive’.

Emerging capitalism, industrial development and the role of crafts

The second half of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth witnessed the emergence of capitalism and the gradual disintegration of traditional modes of life. During the interwar years (1922–40) in particular, the capitalist methods of production were consolidated in Greek society, though industrialization acquired a different form to that of western European societies and remained controversial. The relative industrial developments of the interwar period resulted in certain design activities, which were, however, limited in scope, and resistance towards industrial development was evident. In the arts, the insecurity resulting from the political and economic problems led to the development and exploitation of national identity ideals and the establishment of a ‘back to the roots’ movement. This movement encompassed a wide range of beliefs regarding what this return to the roots might entail. In the decorative arts, where the artist and theoretician Angeliki Hadjimihali was one of the main proponents, it consisted of the study of folk arts and decorative patterns and their application to modern uses. The concept of Greekness became the focus of a whole generation of writers, literary critics, artists and various intellectuals often referred to as ‘the Generation of the Thirties’. The literature of the 1930s in particular constructed national identity as an escape from an unsatisfactory and agonizing reality, as
a recourse to ‘a mythical state of a pure and immaculate Greekness’. The decorative arts became idealized and they were treated as genuine expressions of the soul of the maker, while the products of industry were considered to be inferior. The schism between tradition and modernity was very intense in the artistic and intellectual circles, so that even a modernist painter declared: ‘The only genuine tradition that still exists is folk art, either in the form of folk music, or in the form of post-Byzantine iconography, folk residence, tapestry, embroidery, earthenware, domestic ware, colour disposition, geometric pattern, decorative variety’. Original texts such as the aforementioned one reveal that the intellectual and artistic quests of that period could not be further removed from the realities of industrial production and, in this sense, they curtailed rather than advanced the development of indigenous design.

In many cases, the quest for Greekness was institutionalized and framed under an introvert, if not reactionary, national discourse. The Society for the Protection of Greek Products was founded in 1931 and, in 1934, its first president gave a lecture in which he urged Greek consumers, producers and merchants to ban all foreign products from their activities. According to him, the preference for Greek products was an act of national pride, as well as of national and social solidarity, and was necessary for the survival of the country in the fierce battle for dominance among different nations. The Society for the Protection of Greek Products was mobilized for the imposition on art and handicrafts of a ‘Neohellenic rhythm’, namely a specific style expressing a certain conception of Greekness. Similarly, the Papastratos brothers, powerful tobacco industrialists, supported fine artists in the direction of the ‘Hellenic rhythm’ and financed the establishment of a vocational school for the training of decorators. This was apparently a controversial initiative since, during the same period, European countries were exploring the new social, technological and aesthetic conditions of modernity by systematically practising industrial design. The key to such regressive aesthetic quests in Greek society may be found in the more general search into the past for forms of social organization that would lead Greece out of the world crisis. Although the Greek state was directing its efforts towards its consolidation as a modern capitalist institution, the treatment of design remained linked to an idealized pre-capitalist mode.

We identify here an ambivalence between the general orientation of Greek society and the more specific discourse of the art and design domain. The contradictory relationship between nationalist ideology and design strategy is best described in the words of Ernst Gellner himself: ‘Generally speaking, nationalist ideology suffers from pervasive false consciousness. Its myths invert reality: it claims to defend folk culture while in fact it is forging a high culture; it claims to protect an old folk society while in fact helping to build up an anonymous mass society.’ This contradiction haunted Greek industrial development and generated an unproductive division between industry and the arts and crafts domain. In aesthetic terms, the national ideology of Greekness was expressed in design through an oversimplified and naive stylization of ancient or folk patterns. The following formulation by Gellner is again particularly apposite: ‘[…] a modern, on-wheels high culture celebrates itself in song and dance, which it borrows (stylizing it in the process) from a folk culture which it fondly believes itself to be perpetuating, defending and reaffirming.’

Archival evidence supports the aforementioned observations by showing that, despite the establishment of several industries for the production of consumer goods in the interwar years, many issues were problematic and unresolved for these young firms, including the question of product design. Its nature and role were fuzzy; design input for mass production was not considered on its own terms, but rather as an artistic endeavour that happened to take place within an industrial environment. Craft and industrial production did not operate within a coordinated national strategy, and the roles of artists were unclear. Many of
them were employed by industries where they applied handmade decorations on industrially produced forms rather than create designs for industrial production. This was, for example, the case of artists at the ceramics company ‘Keramikos’, where ‘distinguished artists/painters work[ed] with a sense of honour for the creation of an indigenous type of decorated and illustrated pottery’ [3]. The Board of Directors of this firm further believed that the activities of a pottery factory, because of the artistic nature of its work, contributed to the aesthetic development of the people and the shaping of a ‘National art’. A few years later, a National Bank of Greece report referred to Keramikos as ‘the most important company producing faience ware in Greece’. According to this report, the ‘decorative work of the products is carried out in the artistic department of the factory, following ancient Greek, Byzantine and folk Greek styles’. As numerous examples show, the stylistic references were not limited to the craft tradition, but extended to a variety of design patterns from different phases of antiquity. This led to a curious mixture of formal influences, which may be described as eclectic at its best to chaotic at its worst. This diachronic stylistic mix was compatible with the ideological construction of the continuity of Hellenism through the millennia and finally came to be understood by the locals as absolutely natural. The range of styles available for use in design was often complemented by purely modernist solutions, without any historicist references whatsoever [4].

The ‘Kioutacheia’ potteries provide another relevant example. The activities of this firm were established on the tradition and expertise of the art brought from Kioutacheia, Asia Minor, by Greek refugees. The Board of Kioutacheia potteries claimed that their productive efforts were directed towards ‘saving this very Greek art and enabling it to continue its tradition in contemporary Greek life’. Kioutacheia products had been presented in international exhibitions and received various awards, they were thus considered to be proofs of Greek performance and creativity. A National Bank of Greece report of 1929 on the activities of this company referred to ‘the colossal importance that the applied FOLK ARTS have for every country from a National and from a wealth-producing point of view’. The same report emphasized that, especially in the last years, there had been a very intensive mobilization in the biggest European states regarding the development of ‘applied Folk Arts’. This mobilization had been primarily expressed by the establishment of more and more schools of arts and crafts, in which the major role was held by decorative arts initially based on the folk motifs of each

Fig 3. Department of painting at the Keramikos ceramics factory, Permanent Exhibition of Greek Products, Zappeion Building, Athens, 1933–1938 (Exhibition catalogue), p. 179
country. The writer of the report stressed that in Greece there was a great wealth of motifs from ancient, Byzantine, and contemporary folk art, which could be used to create a ‘synchronized Folk art’ of very high commercial value and increased market competitiveness. In the last paragraph of his report, the author made a rather sentimental call to all ‘patriotic men’, and especially to ‘rich patriots’ who were particularly interested in ‘our Folk art’, to support industry in its first steps for the sake of ‘our National Economy’.

Similarly, in various documents originating from business archives, industrial production was treated as a source of national pride as well as a ground for competition among different countries. Comparison with other countries was often unfavourable for Greek products, which were characterized by low price, but also poor quality and low competitiveness. A newspaper article on an enamel factory on the Greek island of Kea noted with disappointment that the country was lagging behind other European states, which were treating industrial development as a priority of their economic strategies. Balkan states had also realized the importance of the industrial factor and had accordingly reoriented their efforts. The article placed special emphasis on the achievements of Turkey in the industrial sector, which caused surprise as well as admiration, and constituted ‘at least shame’ for Greece. Nonetheless, the realization of the country’s industrial underdevelopment was not going to lead to any substantial progress in this domain. The general orientation of the country was anti-industrial and many considered that Greece’s fundamentally agrarian and maritime economy was incompatible with industrial development. Most industries of the interwar period were trapped in this ambivalent state between declining pre-capitalist world and fledgling modernity, a polarization which was reflected in design and obstructed its development.

In many respects, the pre-war situation continued after the Second World War, despite the fact that the country—and the world—had changed dramatically. The 1950s and early 1960s was for Greece a time of reconstruction, following the terrible decade of the Second World War, foreign occupation and civil war, which inflicted deep and lasting material and psychological wounds. The destiny of Greece was now tied with the Western capitalist bloc and the reconstruction, financed by foreign capital, was realized at a quick pace. The urban centres, especially Athens, experienced intensive industrial growth, the highest in Europe at the time. Foreign investment supported the development of capital-intensive industries so that in the early 1960s exports of manufactured goods exceeded agricultural exports for the first time in Greek history. The national pride generated by local achievements was exploited in advertising and promotional material, which often employed stereotypical symbols of Greekness.

Fig 4. ‘Modern’ and ‘Greek’ style packaging (left and right, respectively) by the ION chocolate firm, Permanent Exhibition of Greek Products, Zappeion Building, Athens, 1933–1938 (catalogue), p. 185

In the 1950s and early 1960s, Greece signed a treaty by which it secured associate status in the European Economic Community beginning in November 1962 and the promise of full membership in 1984. The post-war world was clearly a very different one and this was reflected in substantial changes in lifestyles and consumption patterns. Naturally, Greek industry was also under pressure to adapt to the new circumstances. Given this context, it is surprising that many views held about design before the war still remained powerful in the 1950s and 1960s. Despite the fundamental social and economic rupture experienced in the post-war world, certain ideologies related to art and craft production
had managed to survive. The process of modernization was apparently a source of considerable tension in a country where tradition still represented a substantial force.

Some of the pre-war potteries continued their activities after the war, albeit in a manner that was often severely criticized. According to one critic, the post-war practice was modelled on pre-war aesthetic goals and realizations, and therefore gave no hope whatsoever for the flourishing of ceramic art in the country. The production of goods was primarily based on copying archaic, and other ancient, vessels as well as using modern decorative motifs [6]. Many of these motifs were simplistic representations of rural life, intended for consumers in the tourist market. This process was conducted on an industrial scale, by unskilled workers, and was guided exclusively by the pursuit of profit. The critic proposed as the only appropriate alternative the development of ceramic art by artists producing high quality one-offs. A ceramic artist held a similar view, backed by a passionate and idealistic analysis of the past: ‘It is very natural that a nation, like ours, which has been resurrected after centuries of slavery and burdened by an ancestral heritage of the highest civilization, to undergo in its first renaissance steps the stage of “ancestor-worship”. And [it is very natural], as the latter turns out to be sterile, to open up its mind and heart, as a reaction—almost out of control, to foreign influences of culturally advanced contemporary nations. And after that, the critical and just time will come to search for its real “self,” redeemed from sterile “ancestor-worship” and nightmarish foreign influences. And wanting to “conceive” its real self, and “express” it, and vindicate it.’ This is how an artist conceived of the situation in the late 1950s and declared the ‘individual-artist’, a ‘little hero’, as the agent of art who bore the ‘spiritual national debt’ for a ‘truly neohellenic art’. This high mission was contrasted to the ‘hideous craft or industrial pseudo-imitation of our ancient ceramics, with the mass production of ghastly glazed “lecythus” and “cylix” vessels and such, which is just a matter for the tourist police’. In both the aforementioned viewpoints,
there is no reference to the possibility that ceramic artists might create quality designs aimed specifically at industrial production. Instead, there was a clear polarization between ‘high art’ and the perceived vulgarity of mass-produced objects. The critical discourse is pompous in tone and highly ideological in content. It also appears detached from the everyday experience and indifferent to the practical needs of the consuming public.

In the same period, the famous 1958 lectures by the art critic Panayotis Michelis and their subsequent publication in the avant-garde journal *Zygos* generated some interest for design. Michelis emphasized the ways design was managed on a national level, especially by Britain, Italy and France. He advocated the existence of ‘a special aesthetics, industrial aesthetics’, which he nonetheless considered to be inferior and to require the creative influence of ‘high art’. A different view, and perhaps the most enlightened one on the issue of design aesthetics in that period, was expressed by the artist Alekos Kontopoulos. Kontopoulos claimed that the decorative form of folk art could not possibly offer solutions to the demands of the present and questioned the validity of the concept of ‘Greekness’ in the arts. Progressive voices such as those of Kontopoulos did not have much chance, however, as the expression of ‘Greekness’ and ‘high art’ dominated the art and design discourse. Another regressive position with nationalist overtones was put forward in 1963 by the art critic Angelos Prokopiou, who expressed the view that national tradition should be protected and supported in handicraft such as textiles and ceramics, whereas industrial products such as refrigerators and typewriters could not possibly express the national spirit and should be treated as something completely different. Prokopiou perpetuates existing polarities by assigning the ‘tone of the Nation’ to handicraft and the ‘tone of the Universe’ to industry. His views are indicative of the intellectual and practical difficulties in reconciling tradition and modernity. All the above views suggest the existence of an active dialogue on design issues, incorporating a range of beliefs on the issue of national identity in design. The discussion nonetheless remained inconclusive and perhaps further contributed to a widespread confusion about the nature and role of design. Several examples reveal that this confusion often led to uninspired solutions or outright formalism.

**The rhetoric of Greekness: a most enduring phenomenon**

As more examples from subsequent decades illustrate, the employment of quasi-Greek visual elements and the morphological adaptation of conventional designs have been very common. Greek designers seem to lack the confidence to create new forms and develop novel products for contemporary needs without...
resorting to aesthetic clichés and without expressing idealistic, Greekness-based justifications for their designs. In the late eighties and early nineties, the furniture company Neo Katoikein created a range of products entitled Aigaion (Aegean) [8]. The following text is an example of the advertising copy used in the promotion of this industrially produced range:

The Aegean, in the crossroads of three continents, a Greek sea for four thousand years, receives messages, assimilates influences creatively and, against all novelties and fashions, establishes and defends its civilization. Craftsmen, throughout its history, have been using the humble materials of their land, they turn objects of daily use into works of artistic value, they invest on these labours of love their good humour and their imagination, keeping thus alive the ‘Aegean conscience’ and the ‘Aegean Sea aesthetics’. From all the edges of the Aegean, we have chosen the last specimens of its furniture, we have adapted them to contemporary needs, making sure to preserve intact their formal particularity. We have also gathered the objects that are still being manufactured there, with the same techniques and the same faith, and thus we present today the most complete collection of traditional furniture and objects which remind us of the most precious thing Greece has: its sea, its Aegean. 

This is a typical example of rhetoric loaded with populist and nationalistic overtones, a rhetoric by which the average citizen of the country is bombarded in advertising, journalism, popular culture and other aspects of daily life, including design. Such cases are expressions of essentialism, in other words of belief in the existence of a Greek ‘essence’ which exists from time immemorial. They are also manifestations of what Billig terms ‘banal nationalism’, through which the nation is taken for granted and continuously ‘reminded’ to citizens as something natural and unquestionable. In this way, nations are ‘naturalized’, absorbed into a common-sense view about the way the world is, and invested with moral values and a ‘treasured uniqueness’, which elevate the national over other social groupings. The choice of the Aegean Sea is particularly significant; the Aegean is treated as a condensed expression of the nation, loaded with symbolic values and standing for national virtues.

Another eloquent example is provided by a recent research programme on traditional Greek furniture, conducted under the auspices of the Institute of Neohellenic Research of the National Research Foundation. The project constituted in the study of nineteenth-century furniture from Hermoupolis, capital of the island of Syros, an important industrial and transit trade centre of the Mediterranean during that century. Such furniture included imported or imitation European furniture of a cosmopolitan bourgeoisie, as well as plain, folk furniture of the poor. Following the initial research, original nineteenth-century furniture were used as starting points and sources of inspiration in order to create a new range for modern needs.

Although this venture was based on original and important research, the validity and purpose of redesigning the old objects is questionable, especially as the redesign project is underpinned by a rather problematic discussion of influences and cultural identity. In the published catalogue, the designer introduced her work by positioning it in a national

identity rhetoric rich in commonplace stereotypes and sweeping generalizations: ‘The sea is the connecting link of Hellenism as well as the point of contact between Greek and foreign cultural elements and traditions. In the islands of the Aegean, the uniform artistic tradition is a result of the cultural heritage of the Byzantium, of the environment which is in a scale accessible to humans, of the architectural monuments of the ancient and medieval worlds, and of course of the Greek light.’ Identity is presented as a fixed entity, as an essence, not as a process of becoming. Such a line of thinking is not uncommon at all; it is equally followed in an advertisement for a contemporary, industrially produced armchair incorporating as a decorative element a small head of Aphrodite, which is a simplified version of a fourth-century B.C. figurine [10]. Again, the description of the product is based on a vague notion of eternal Greekness, which implies attachment to a rather static conception of history and tradition. Furthermore, reference to craft and industrial production is rather ambiguous and perhaps problematic, craft being presented as a process by which unique pieces of great value are created.

The persistence of the ideology of Greekness and the controversial influence it has had on contemporary design may be illustrated by another publication of the mid-1990s, which included various products designed by Greek designers (‘from toothbrushes to tanks’). This publication is accompanied by an extensive introductory text where the progression of design is outlined ‘from Ancient Greece, to Byzantium, to folk culture, up to contemporary industry’. Despite such grand ideological constructions to support indigenous design, the latter failed to take off in the local and international markets alike during the 1980s and 1990s. The Athens Olympic Games of 2004 were seen by many as a crucial turning point and fuelled excessive hopes for the revival of the Greek economy. The example of the 1992 Olympic Games in Barcelona had shown that this institution could be an ideal opportunity to animate and revitalize
local design practice and discourse. The occasion of
the 2004 Games in Athens, however, failed to achieve
that and in fact may be considered a sadly wasted
chance, as it did not generate the much needed de-
velopment of design practice and awareness in the coun-
try. On the contrary, the issue of design remained
marginal throughout the preparation of the Games,
and the design output for the needs of the Games was
practically negligible. It is indicative that the main
design issue discussed and publicized throughout the
preparation period was the design of a specific object,
the Olympic torch, designed by Andreas Varotsos.
This issue was framed by argument that was restricted
to a formalist pursuit of Greekness. Before the torch
was presented to the public, it had been described as
‘influenced by a Romanian sculptor of the early
twentieth century’ (implying Brancusi).\footnote{45} Perhaps
anticipating reactions in this direction, the designer
emphasized during the presentations of the torch to
the public and the following press conferences that
the design was based on the shape of an olive-tree
leaf; it was therefore ‘clearly expressing Greekness’.
Despite the emphatic references to the Greekness of
the torch during its promotion, an Athenian daily
newspaper nonetheless accused the designer of design-
ing ‘a frugal and modern form’, which ‘doesn’t have
any connotations of “Greekness” or the aesthetics of
our very rich national tradition, as it very well could—
and should …’.\footnote{55} The last quote suggests that public
opinion has internalized an aesthetics of easily recog-
nizable ‘national’ symbols and expects them to be
reproduced by contemporary design. This is another
example of ‘banal nationalism’, implying notions of
nationhood that are deeply embedded in contempo-
rary thinking, an ideology which is so familiar that it
is hardly noticeable, it is taken for granted.\footnote{56}

From the aforementioned recent examples, it
becomes obvious how deeply and how seriously the
Greek design discourse remains trapped in a stalemate
pursuit of an elusive and perhaps non-existent Greek-
ness.\footnote{57} Examples from the post-war decades clearly
illustrate the fixation of local designers on a superficial,
often megalomaniac and usually kitsch expression of
Greekness \footnote{11}. The resistance and persistence of ide-
ological constructions regarding what constitutes
Greekness in design and what are the appropriate
forms to express such an ideal are indeed astonishing.\footnote{58}
What is particularly significant is that national identity
is commonly presented as ‘weighted towards “heri-
tage” and the “common past” rather than to the
“common future,” or […] even […] the “common
present”’.\footnote{59} As Calotychos observes, Greeks have a
propensity for wielding a symbolic narrative over
more pragmatic strategies. In fact, ‘this tendency to
prioritize abstract narratives, of which the classicizing
variety is a privileged mainstay, over more immanent

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{fig11}
\caption{Detail of advertisement for
watches with flag theme, inspired by
the victory of the Greek national
football team in Euro 2004, as well as
by the Athens 2004 Olympic Games,
K (insert of Kathimerini newspaper),
issue 63, 15 August 2004, p. 11.
Courtesy Folli-Follie S.A}
\end{figure}
ones constitutes part of what Greek social scientist Nicos Mouzelis has termed the “formalism of Greek society”. The actual use and functionality of products receive minor attention; what prevails is an attribute that we might term ‘symbolic functionality’. Many design examples appear as metamorphoses of formalism, the visual manifestations of a static conception of history. However, the emphasis on identity has not contributed to Greek design’s acquisition of a distinct character or a more powerful image internationally. The ideology of Greekness has primarily served purposes of ‘internal consumption’; in other words, it has had a positive psychological effect on Greek people by generating feelings of pride for their culture and softening their insecurity. At the same time, it has not provided any motivation for improvement as it has made Greek people rest on their ideological laurels, which are in fact figments of their imagination and bear little relation to current reality.

On the other hand, examination of the contemporary design scene in Greece reveals a major trend in a radically different direction than the ‘nationalist’ approach identified in this paper. This other trend is characterized by a total break with any local visual, ideological or other traditions and by attempts to engage with an international, or even supranational design mentality. Nonetheless, design trends are expressed mainly on a stylistic level and the local design discourse remains underdeveloped, at the expense of a range of complex, long-standing and unresolved issues in this domain, such as production infrastructure, design education and design management, to name but a few.

It therefore comes as no surprise that nowadays Greek design remains non-competitive and holds a negligible place in the international market.

Questioning national design histories

As Burke notes, the playwright Brian Friel once observed that what shapes the present and the future is not so much the past itself as ‘images of the past embodied in language’. I have provided examples of the design discourse in Greece, where powerful images of an idealized past are reproduced and solidified through language. As I have also tried to show through the pictures accompanying this text, images of the past embodied in two-dimensional or three-dimensional design can be equally powerful, despite or because of the fact that, as Williamson notes, ideology embedded in form is the hardest to see. The practice and representation of design in Greece throughout the twentieth century have therefore underpinned the perpetuation of a certain idea of the past. The development of design in Greece, in both its verbal and material manifestations, demonstrates an obsession with an imagined and socially constructed ‘Greekness’. The survival of this ideology of national identity into the twentieth-first century indicates its continuing hold over Greek people. The persistence of national identity myths and their design materializations reveals that such ideas have a very solid grounding in Greek mentality, primarily because they express the continuing insecurity of the state and people within the European and world balance of powers. The construction of national identity, endowed with a layer of superiority stemming from ancient glories, provides a balancing element to the instability and insecurity of the present. Though by no means the only strategy followed by Greek designers today, the continuing preoccupation with a formalist conception of national identity remains valid and enjoys a high level of acceptability by the consuming public. I argue in particular that the long-term obsession with the expression of national identity has restricted many design endeavours within the realm of formalism and has led to intellectual stagnation and practical deadlock. By relegating issues of design, production and consumption to the sphere of formalism, the nationalist approach to Greek design has diverted designers and public alike from facing and resolving on a pragmatic level the pressing design problems of everyday life. This formalist approach may have been psychologically useful in certain periods of modern Greek history, as it has instilled a certain sense of pride and value to locals. Judging from the perspective of the fast-changing global environment of the twentieth-first century, however, the overall balance is questionable. As historian Mazower argues, ‘Nation-states construct their own image of the past to shore up their ambitions for the future. […] But today the old delusions of grandeur are being replaced by a more sober sense of what individual countries can achieve alone. As small states integrate themselves in a wider world, […] the stringently patrolled and narrow-minded conception of history which they once nurtured and which gave them a kind of justification starts to look less plausible and less necessary. Other futures may require other pasts.’
It should be finally stressed that nationalist attitudes towards design are not limited to the Greek case. The study of design history internationally reveals that nation-based categorizations and distinctions are very widespread. Of course design as a profession was conceived and developed within a world of nation-states and it is perhaps reasonable to study design following national classifications. But, on the other hand, it has been argued that such distinctions may have lead to unwise categorizations and stereotyping, which undermines the historical understanding of design processes. New design is regularly expected to conform to preconceived ideas of acceptability along national lines or national design ‘schools’. This leads to the wider question whether design is perhaps entrapped by the dictates of national identity. This article has been critical of nationalist ideas by focusing on design in Greece, but perhaps this criticism could move one step further into the international design arena. Does the study of design along national lines obscure the complex and multifaceted interactions of design-related historical phenomena? Given the continuous, worldwide, transnational flow and exchange of people, objects and ideas during design’s history, is there any point in categorizing design along national lines, other than perpetuating the acceptability and dominance of notions of nationhood? Is it possible for design to be thought of and dealt with outside nationalist ideologies? Last but not least, might this be the case where the present article is itself excessively guided by the idea of a ‘national’, i.e. Greek design output? In this vein, I would agree with Billig, who observes that concepts that an analyst might use to describe causal factors may themselves be historical constructs of nationalism. The idea of ‘national’ design is one of these concepts, founding discussions of local design on the basis of nationhood assumptions. Distancing oneself from such assumptions is not an easy task. ‘Because nationalism has deeply affected contemporary ways of thinking, it is not easily studied. One cannot step outside the world of nations, nor rid oneself of the assumptions and common-sense habits which come from living within that world. Analysts must expect to be affected by what should be the object of their study.’ For this reason, ‘we must distance ourselves from ourselves and from that which we accept as obvious or “natural” […] we have to attempt to stand back from our common-sense assumptions […]’, from our ‘disciplinary common

Epilogue

In this article, I have tried to trace the design metamorphoses of Greek national identity, in both its verbal and material expressions. The chronological span of the study is rather wide and the emphasis on different periods has perhaps been uneven. It has also been necessary, for practical reasons, to have recourse to verbal formulations that might appear too dense, especially to a non-Greek readership. Nonetheless, I believe that the main argument emerges clearly out of the plethora of information and could be repeated, in conclusion, as follows. Greek design, since the nineteenth century and into the twenty-first, has been obsessively preoccupied with the issue of national identity, or Greekness, an ideological construction originating from a nexus of economic, social and cultural factors. As numerous examples illustrate, the emphasis on Greekness as a guiding principle for design has repeatedly led to formalist solutions, which have contributed to a state of stagnation in the local design scene.

The case of Greek design triggers further thoughts on the role of nationalism in the development of design and design history internationally. Categorizing design along national divisions is a widespread practice which generates stereotypical conceptions of design in different social and cultural settings. Having the Greek case as its starting point, this article questions the validity of such categorizations, which affect both design history and practice. The incessant movement of ideas, images and objects all over the world, in the past but especially in the present times of global communications, suggests that nation-based discourse on design is highly restrictive and obscures the complex, multifaceted and dynamic processes involving design activities and designed objects.

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Notes

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4 See, for example, the collection of essays edited by Tsaoussis, op. cit. (1984).


10 Théophylle Gautier, L’Orient (first volume), Charpentier, 1884, p. 120.


Construction of Design Rules, National Technical University of Athens Press, 2003 [in Greek].

13 Figures [1–3], [5] and [6] provide useful pointers to the study of gender with respect to design activities and design ideologies in Greece. Gender issues are not, however, dealt with in this paper.

14 Tziovos, pp. 38–9.


16 Dimitris Stamelas, Neohellenic Folk Art—Sources, Orientations and Achievements since the 16th Century, Gutenberg, 1993, p. 168. See also Klaus Vrieslander and Julio Kann, Rodaki’s House in Aegina, Aktris, 1997 (first edition 1934) [in Greek].


18 Mass culture was distinguished from ‘an idealised “folk” culture’, which was conceived as embodying a spirit that kindled a sense of belonging, of knowing one’s place in an organic world, a pre-urban Gemeinschaft where one’s identity was part of an ingrained and unquestioned way of being.’ Edensor, 2002, p. 13.


21 Gellner, p. 124.

22 Ibid., p. 58. See also Matthiopoulos, pp. 415–16.

23 Report of the Board of Directors of ‘Kerameioke’ Potteries to the General Assembly of Shareholders for the Balance of the Year 1930, 15/5/1931, Historical Archives of the National Bank of Greece, microfi che no. 2194 [in Greek].

24 On Pottery in General (and Particularly Regarding Faience and Porcelain Factories and Plastics Factories) (National Bank of Greece Report), Department of Enterprises and Funding, September 1940, Historical Archives of the National Bank of Greece, microfi che no. 2131 [in Greek].

25 Report of the Board of Directors of ‘Kionatheia’ Potteries to the General Assembly of Shareholders for the Balance of the Year 1926, 31/3/1927, Historical Archives of the National Bank of Greece, microfi che no. 2194 [in Greek].

26 Dimitris Zannos, Report on the Course/Progress and Future Evolution of the Works of ‘Kionatheia’ Potteries, National Bank of Greece, October 1929, Historical Archives of the National Bank of Greece, Industrial Credit Section, microfi che no. 2194, p. 1 (capitals in the original) [in Greek].

27 Ibid., pp. 1–2.

28 Ibid., p. 7.

29 Ibid., pp. 1–2.

30 ‘The Greek Enamel Industry of Kea’, undated, unsigned newspaper clipping (perhaps around 1933–1934), Historical Archives of the National Bank of Greece, Industrial Credit Section, microfi che no. 2229 [in Greek].

31 Extensive discussion on these issues in Hadziiossif (2003), op. cit.

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34 This advertisement employs the image of a female dressed in the traditional male outfit, the ‘foustanella’ costume. The male wearing such a costume, the tsolias, constitutes a widely accepted personification of ‘the nation’. Hobsbawm discusses symbols and devices analogous to the tsolias which came into existence as part of the emergence of national movements and states, for example the French Marianne. Such devices were added to the symbolic vocabulary of states to express national character as seen by the members of the nation itself. Eric Hobsbawm & Terence Ranger (eds.), The Invention of Tradition, Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 7, 276.


38 Frosso Euthymiadi-Menegaki, ‘Findings and Reflections on the Traditional Male Outfit, the “Foustanella” Costume. The Male Wearing Such a Costume, the Tsolias, Constitutes a Widely Accepted Personification of “the Nation”. Hobsbawm Discusses Symbols and Devices Analogous to the Tsolias which Came into Existence as Part of the Emergence of National Movements and States, for Example the French Marianne. Such Devices were Added to the Symbolic Vocabulary of States to Express National Character as Seen by the Members of the Nation Itself’, Journal of Design History, vol. 18, no. 3 (2005), pp. 269–83.

39 Ibid.


41 Aleks Kontopoulos, ‘Contemporary Art and the Issue of Greekness’, Zygos, issue 11-12, September–October 1956, pp. 27–30 [in Greek].

42 Angatos Prokopiou, Industrial Morphology, issue 3, February 1963, pp. 4–6 [in Greek].


45 Michael Billig, Banal Nationalism, Sage, 1995.

46 See Edensor, op. cit., pp. 11 (emphasis in the original), 38. See also ibid., pp. 39–40.

47 Rosalia Ioannidou, Furniture Memories in Contemporary Design, Industrial Museum of Hermoupolis, 2002 (without page numbering) [in Greek].

48 Edensor, op. cit., p. 24. Edensor also quotes Ingold and Kuttula who claim that tradition should not be understood as a retified set of endlessly repeated practices, passed on as cultural heritage, but as knowledge acquired through flexible practice. ‘Tradition thus undergoes continual generation and regeneration […].’ Ibid., p. 55.

50 Ibid., 114.

51 ‘Greekness means continuous questioning […] finally, creativity’, Varangis furniture company advertisement, BHM Magazine, no. 108, 3 November 2002 [in Greek].

52 (Untitled), NTIZAIN The European Magazine on Design Aesthetics, no. 5; Spring 1995, p. 60 [in Greek].

53 A comprehensive account of the state of industrial design in Greece may be found in Panayotis Vokotopoulou, Eleni Mitropoulou and Yorgos Tzatzikakis, Directory of Engineers Involved in Industrial Design, Technical Chamber of Greece, 1992 [in Greek]. Note also the absence of Greek design from the European arena: John Thackara, Winners! How Today’s Successful Companies Innovate by Design, BIS, 1997.


55 Thanos Economopoulos, Comment in Kathimerini (daily newspaper), 16 January 2003, p. 13 [in Greek].

56 In a seemingly irrelevant but significant incident, when the Prime Minister of Greece visited Japan in 2005, he offered olive oil as a gift to Japanese officials. Designer and theorist George Parmenidis highlighted with disappointment the connotations of this gesture for contemporary Greek culture. In a time of fundamental social and economic changes on a global scale, the Greek state represents itself on the most official level through a highly symbolic gesture implying a romantic attachment to an idealized past. (Comment by G. Parmenidis, ‘Past, Present, and Future of Industrial Design in Greece’ Symposium, National Technical University of Athens, 2–4 December 2005.)

57 Discussing ‘Greekness’ in relation to architecture, Professor Dimitris Philippides points out that ‘it is to nobody’s interest to dissolve a mythology that has nourished so many generations of our society of petits-bourgeois’. He also acknowledges though that ‘Greekness’ is ‘a great point of reference and a hermeneutic key’, [...] ‘as long as we don’t fall in the trap of defining it or considering it as something real’. In Tsaioussis (1983), p. 222 [emphasis in original].

58 A range of uses of the ancient past in modern Greek life were dealt with in Uses of Antiquity by Modern Hellenism (Symposium Proceedings) Society of Studies/Moraitis School, Athens, 2002 [in Greek], as well as during the international conference ‘Antiquity, Archaeology and Greekness in Twentieth Century Greece’, Benaki Museum, Athens, 10–12 January 2007.

59 Edensor, op. cit., p. 17.

60 Quoted in Calotychos, op. cit., pp. 3–4.

61 In one of the rare ethnographic studies of the Greek urban space, Hirschon discusses the great symbolic value that simple household objects held for Greeks who had come from Asia Minor as refugees. She notes in particular the non-practical character of furniture, which is invested with spiritual values and is described as ‘symbolic’. To a non-Greek like Hirschon, the unpractical treatment of objects by the locals appears to be irrational and leads her to a deeper understanding of the objects’ expressive and symbolic roles, which prevailed over more mundane, practical considerations. Renée Hirschon, Heirs of the Greek Catastrophe—The Social Life of Asia Minor Refugees in Pireaus, Cultural Foundation of the National Bank of Greece, 2004 [in Greek], especially pages 15, 248–58 and 425–6, English edition: Clarendon Press, 1989. This issue of the interplay between practicality and symbolism of objects in Greek culture appears quite complex and requires further study.

62 Avdela emphasizes the role of the Greek educational system in creating, reproducing and consolidating a static, ethnocentric view of history in which the Greek nation and its civilization are understood as natural, eternal and unchanging entities. Efis Avdela, ‘The Teaching of History in Greece’, Journal of ModernGreek...
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Studies, Volume 18, 2000, pp. 239–53. ‘The symbolic burden of the past becomes […] the primary feature of the national identity and the yardstick by which everything is evaluated: the present, the past, the self, and others.’ Avdela, p. 247.

63 The main features of the prevailing self-image are ‘idealization of the past, bewilderment in the face of the present, and fear about the future’ (Avdela, p. 245), it therefore leads to passivity. The influence of this mythical self-image may be traced in various manifestations of contemporary Greek life and is considered to be highly problematic: ‘When myths influence one-sidedly the contemporary attitude of peoples, they become detrimental as long as there is no healthy relationship between myth and reality.’ Nikos Konstantaras, ‘Our Myths and Us’, Kathimerini (daily newspaper), 14 January 2007, p. 22.

64 This trend, which emphasizes modern or postmodern approaches and is represented by a diverse range of designers, might be the subject of a separate study. See also note 68.


68 As noted earlier in this paper, classicist, nationally inspired design approaches often operate in combination with other strategies, e.g. purely modernist approaches, as illustrated by the example of the ION chocolate products in [4]. Today, the Varangis furniture company is a characteristic example of a design philosophy and practice claiming to express modernity and Greekness at the same time (see note 51).


72 For example, relevant criticisms were raised by Kerstin Wickman and Widar Halén during the Connecting Conference, Helsinki-Tallinn, 2006, available on http://tm.uiah.fi/connecting/, accessed 2 February 2007. These scholars described the concept of ‘Scandinavian design’ as a myth or cliché and exposed its idealization and promotion by design historians, critics and curators. In more general terms, they questioned the validity of design classifications based on notions of nationhood and examined the meanings of ‘local’ and ‘global’ in design discourse. See also the related discussion in Kjetil Fallan, ‘How an Excavator Got Aesthetic Pretensions — Negotiating Design in 1960s Norway’, Journal of Design History, vol. 20, no. 1, 2007, pp. 43–59.


74 Billig, p. 37.

75 Ibid., pp. 15, 51.