DESIGN PROJECTS AMONG STUDENTS OF DIFFERENT CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS: EDUCATIONAL METHODOLOGIES

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ABSTRACT

The present research is an experiment that investigates the potential -conscious or subconscious- influence of the designer's cultural heritage on design development. In addition, it examines the influence of globalisation, via the communication technologies, on the designer's sensibility and creativity. This phenomenon, novel to Greek reality but common to most European countries, remains problematic and research-worthy. Inspiration and starting point of our work have been the many multicultural foreign students that Greece received during the last decade.

During the last two decades, Greece has been experiencing an increased diversity in art expression. The European borders are open for almost fifteen years. A decade of changes in the political circumstances resulted in changes in the cultural climate. Globalisation has increased the diversity in art and design expression through the contact with other cultures. Furthermore, the additional results of this phenomenon are also part of our research and examples in many fields of design are provided from both our research and teaching programs. The thoughts and remarks of participants originating from different countries or continents and with different cultural identities are included. The results of this research are intended to contribute to the practice of design as well as to the active design education field.

Keywords: design development, influence, cultural background

1   INTRODUCTION

Over the centuries, diverse local cultures have been spreading throughout Asia, Africa, Europe, and all around the world, inspiring designer to create textiles, fashion, ceramics and decorative items, founding and cultivating, in this way, the national cultural heritage of each area. The advancement of technology, the economic imperatives and the cultural developments have brought about dramatic transformations in the organization of design, its methods and results. In parallel, the cultural routes stimulate contemporary artistic and professional creativity by providing a suitable forum for exchange of information and experiences on design, as well as insight in the diversity and the cultural development of people from other continents. The use of a particular design is linked to tradition and reflects unchanged believes, customs and hierarchies, often carrying spiritual meaning. In certain parts of the world and during specific historical eras there used to be -and still is in many places- a complex relationship between design and identity, connected to aspects such as culture, heritage, religion, social status and caste. Political circumstances changed greatly during the last decade and affected the cultural climate. The question that arises is about the power of culture and heritage as a generating source for innovative design, in today's technical, computerised and globalised world

2   THE CASE STUDY

The case study analyses how advanced students with different cultural backgrounds, but with design education of a similar level, approached and completed a specific design assignment. The study also examines to which extent the presented results were influenced by the students' cultural identities and heritage. This research experiment began in the early 90s. The evidence presented in this work come from a number of sources that have been collected during this ten-year period and are based on exchanges between students and staff (through the Socrates, Erasmus and Tempus educational programmes), as well as on Greek and foreign students' projects. Interviews were conducted and experimental assignments were undertaken by a number of students. Twenty-five design students, from different countries and cultures, participated in this work. The use of a large diversity of regional and cultural participants, form the basis to develop future model examples, based on the possibilities of teaching design to students of different cultural heritage. The research presented here, can potentially be used for future design education, associated with local regions, using ethnic cultures and identities as a possible resource.

3   RESEARCH APPROACH

The research study took place in the Interior Design Faculty of the Technological Educational Institution (TEI) of Athens, Greece. The experiment was arranged in groups of one, two or three participants, according to their wish and cultural background. All students were asked to propose a textile design, for household use - or for personal use if they wished so - inspired by their *present* cultural inputs. They all had to follow a similar work procedure that lasted the same period of time but not necessarily on the same academic semester. The international students from "Socrates", "Erasmus" and "Tempus" were encouraged to participate in the experimental projects together with their Greek fellow students. An important issue was the involvement of every individual in activities that would allow them to approach the requested information and gain access to data. A prompt, virtual access to the places and people of their choice was

offered to the students through a combination of site-seeing activities and visits, as a part of their education programme. The activities were categorised as follows:

-*Mental or scientific activities*: access to historical and contemporary sources and interviews with experts of their present region.

-*Physical activities:* visits and informal walks to cultural, architectural and scenic monuments, natural and cultural sites all around Greece, and opportunities to visit textile collections, workshops and businesses, in order to achieve the maximum information input.

4 METHODOLOGY

The first step was to employ a data selection method by asking all participants to photograph or sketch and analyse all forms, designs and items that inspired them to visualize and create a new textile design. The second step was to encourage participants to come up with design ideas and design elements based on the selected photo-sketching work. Written notes, remarks, specifications of ideas and statements accompanied the sketches and representations, visualizing in this way, the emotional inputs of each particular participant and defining the differences as well as the similarities of their mental processes.

To the evident question "why is textile design the selected topic?" we have to define that, besides the in vivo technical availability, the fact is that textile art has become an increasingly popular outlet for artistic expression among design students in the recent years. Formerly restricted to the professional trainees, the art of textile design is currently growing in appeal as design students discover its versatility and power of expression, which are the media required by our experiment.

4.1 Teaching methodology

The teaching methodology is composed of six main parts:

-*Collection and investigation* of photographic data or personal sketches, selected and drawn by the participants during the first investigating part of their assignment and accompanied by written reports of the students' impressions, feelings and ideas (figure 1, 2, 3),
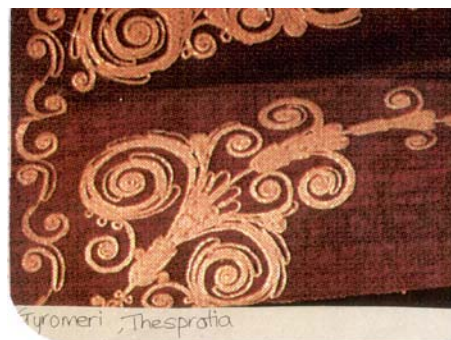

Figure 1, from the collection of photos and sketches of personal interest

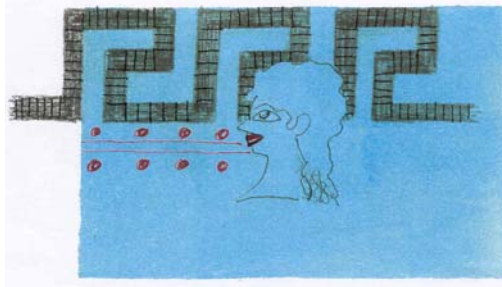*Figure 2, from the collection of photos and sketches from the Athens museum.*

Figure 3, from the collection of photos and sketches from the Athens museum.

- *Student Presentation and Analysis* of the selected data, within the scope of our design teaching projects,
- *Evaluation* of the data by the research team,
- *Development* of the selected designs from a new point of view, conducted during the design sessions, via special design teaching projects. All designs were treated with respect to their cultural values, aiming to create products that fulfil the demands of the modern consumer and at the same time, can be produced with traditional and computerized means of production. They were all accompanied by written reports of the participants' research procedure (figure 4a, 4b, 4c, 5).
- *New design* proposals, based on the previously developed designs, with a wide range of possibilities and adaptations, as well as examples of multiple potential applications. The designs used in our projects, in most cases, are developed by hand and via computer programmes, thus offering work interest, versatility and variety of possibilities and applications.
- *Prototype experimental samples,* created for the final presentation by the participants (figure 6), or by collaborating manufacturers. The employed media of production, yarns, dyes, equipment and type of labour were the ones used locally. Production is covered through personal unique artistic work, traditional handicraft and industry. A parallel market research was conducted in order to decide upon the projects' parameters. The final selections were made upon the originality of the designs, their production and their commercial acceptability.

Figure 4a, Impression and development of the selected photos into textile designs for household use

Figure 4b, Impression and development of the selected photos into textile designs for household use

Figure 4c, Proposals for household use and for fashion, implementing the above designs

Figure 5, Evolution of the selected photos (figure 2) into textile designs for household use

Figure 6, Production of the selected textile designs of figure 5

- Verbal reports, of the participants' presentation of their final design works were recorded or shorthanded for our research, and were presented to a mixed audience of academic staff, design students and participants.

4.2 Elements and constraints of the work procedure

In order to specify the framework of the assignment, various elements and constraints must be considered and related, such as the kind of textiles, the target market, the location produced and the size of the production cost. Our decision was to omit most of the above parameters, specifying only the following characterizations: *Textiles of general household use, Clothing, Textiles for commercial production, and Textiles for artistic creation.* The participants were free to select one or more from the above specifications.

4.3 Design methodology

The first stage of designing starts by categorizing the differed visual inputs in a folio, in order to begin filtering the flood of information. Figure one and two include examples of the participants' interests, sketches, remarks and design developments. In all cases, interests and inspiration focused on antiquity, and most specifically on certain selections from tradition. The collected sketches and photos for each student exceeded fifty, but the final designs were based on much less, and were produced after many experimental approaches to the subject. There was only one participant, who,

in contrast to the majority, was inspired by nature, thus transforming natural objects into abstract patterns, searching for "designs with motion", as she states in her notes.

The final proposals were selected among hundreds of sketches for experimental artistic or commercial production. The means and techniques of artistic creations were left to the students' personal choice, and the same stood for colour combinations in all cases, since the freedom of expression in all the above aspects was of major importance, counting highly in our evaluation. All details and steps of work were included in the submitted written reports and then evaluated.

4.4 Design Development

The development process of the design was analysed, distinguishing the phase of sketching as a first decision-making phase on design ideas. The development of sketches into designs progressed gradually during the course of the experiment. An independent sample was taken from the preliminary designs, in order to test the influences of the participants' present environment and hereditary cultural identities. While developing the designs and specifically from the preliminary phases to the more detailed ones, the participants were influenced mainly by their personal cultural heritage, and less by their present environment. The design development and the final designs presented were a conscious or subconscious product of each person's educational, technological, regional (past or present) and cultural inputs, in a percentage that varied highly among them.

In order to examine the extent of this influence, an additional design project was assigned, with one particular field of inspiration: the *Cycladic Idols.* The *Cycladic Idols* were chosen as the most appropriate forms of inspiration closely related to our modern culture. All participants produced sketches that displayed a higher degree of influence from their cultural heritage, a phenomenon that was even more clearly illustrated on their coloured sketches, final designs, written statements and presentations. It is noteworthy that in total, there was no cross influence among students, and only minor regional influences from their present environment, mainly in the field of inspiration. Thus, we evaluated the above parameters as follows:

-*Education* influenced our experiment in all steps of the participants work procedure, differentiating accordingly all phases of design decision-making.

-*Technology* assisted the participants' work, directly or indirectly, in a much lesser degree, often subconsciously.

-*Region* was a strong inspiration motive, especially the participant's present region, but this influence declined in each step of the designing process, and was eventually minimized in the final presentation.

-*Culture,* together with education, is the dominating and confining aspect of the final design, mainly on colour selections and presentation. The textile of figure 6, designed and produced by a non-Greek participant, is one of the many examples of hereditary cultural influence on final creations that we experienced. The intention of the participant from Polynesia was a decorative fabric based on Hellenic prototypes. Never the less the final work radiates the creator's culture. Figure 3 presents an interesting disfiguration by the above participant of a Hellenic "kori". As an additional example I wish to mention the use of Acropolis as textile "motivo", by an African participant, developed in flaming reds, black and gold.

5   EVALUATION CRITERIA

As with all group case studies, the works varied in size, impact and message. The analysis revealed that there were considerable individual differences in the types of sketches and designs constructed by the participants. The most considerable differences were related to the various paths they followed through research and designing, how quickly they proceeded, what they aimed their remarks at, and how many different sketches, designs, and samples they produced. We identified the selected work by classifying the outcomes and outlining the different tools and activities used during the stages that led to the completion of the assignment. In the initial stages of this experiment an empirical approach was adopted to gain understanding about the participants' sources, selections and interests. Thus, we categorized:

- *Sources:* Sources of research, interest and inspiration. All the participants of Erasmus and Socrates, with one exception, visited Museums, Archaeological and Traditional sites, seeking inspiration there. The other students were highly attracted by nature and Tradition, and by natural or traditional sources of design inspiration.

- *Selection:* Selection of interests, objects, colours, material and media of work. All the participants of Erasmus and Socrates photographed and provided sketches from Museums, and Archaeological and Traditional sites. All the above participants, with one exception, photographed, collected and sketched the same theme: prehistoric abstract statuettes. For the rest of them, these were of minor interest, as they focused mainly on combinations of nature/tradition. All samples created by the participants were made of natural fibbers, and the medium of production was, to a high degree, personal artistic creation.

- *Style*: Style of presentation, illustration and performance. All participants presented their selections, sketches, proposals and final designs in a diverse and very personalised manner, not only from the design-colour approach, but also as a general product design development. The style of the final live presentation of their design experience was our final evaluation parameter concerning the actual influence of their cultures.

- *Colour:* Colour is a media of communication, a power of creation, an expression of feeling, very important for life - a grey world would have been very sad and monotonous - since it influences our personality and moods. It has also been a powerful tool for humans from the prehistoric age to nowadays, its perception being one of the first triumphs of the

human intellect. With design and colour humans express their thoughts and feelings, artistic anxieties and visions, culture and heritage, in other words, their cultural identity. In our work, most of the time, we place emphasis on the study and analysis of design, often forgetting the tremendous transformations that would occur - and do occur - with the use of colour. These transformations do not just influence forms and shapes, but also mainly reflect the designers' inner world and real identity.

The presence and importance of colour - its importance often neglected in design disciplines - was the focal point, the key element and the strongest evidence of the influence, on the presented designs, of the different cultural identities involved in our experiment, even among students who were second generation European citizens, but without the European cultural heritage. The colour-use evaluation presented us with the highest percentage of presence of the different individual cultures, plus with a phenomenon worth mentioning: The colour scale used by all northern European and non-European participants included the brightest possible hues, in total contrast to the pastel or over-pastel tones of European-Mediterranean students.

The additional criteria employed, were the influence of globalisation and communication technologies on the designer's sensibility and creativity and on the artist's feeling of total freedom in creation. Letting the participants free to select the media of their work, proved that none of them wished or required the use of multimedia, not even for the written protocols, with the exception of six individuals. The participants' choice was of major critical value, as it establishes the fact that technical processes, which dominate today's world and aesthetics, can be challenged in the field of art and design.
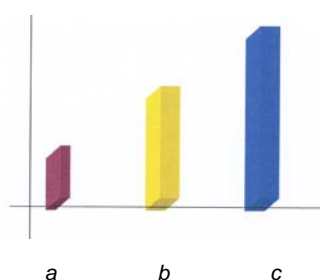

Figure. 7: The influence of cultural identity. Final projects with obvious cultural influence

6   CONCLUSIONS

The presented works, individual or group productions, of our participants were 14 in total, with participants from Europe, Asia, Africa and Polynesia. The completed projects with obvious cultural influences were counted, after the research team of the Textile Design Studio analysed the data (figure 7). Thus the final projects with obvious cultural influence on design development were three out of fourteen (21.4 %), on colour thirteen out of fourteen (92.8 %) and on final total presentation eight out of fourteen (57 %).

Evidently, elements such as personality and cultural identity still play a very important, almost ethical, role in our contemporary aesthetics, generating the power of art with or without the use of technical processes. Human beings - users and creators - differ from each other, reflecting in their designs their personalities and cultural identities. The human mind is not a "tabula rasa" and does not react like one to educational inputs; neither is human perception culturally preconditioned. The same stands for our understanding of beauty, functionality, and aesthetics.

What inspires a designer is an individual matter. In general, one is motivated by the desire to create something new and challenging, but often inspiration is derived from one's inner world and consists of many different inputs. Family, childhood environment, home traditions, cultural, ethical and aesthetical inputs from the first years of life are of top importance, since they form the roots of the individual's aesthetic and ethic attitude, on which design approach based. A person's aesthetic vision of the world, his aesthetic processes and views on today's and tomorrow's world are based, to a great extent, on those first influences, formulated or even transformed via adapted and educated cultural paths, but always existing in the hidden or obvious background. They are always present when the individual is set free to dream and create, always influencing -consciously or subconsciously, directly or indirectly- the paths of mental and artistic procedures and creation. Nevertheless, in the process of globalisation, the question remains: how strong and for how long?

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