SUE MACGILLIVRAY, GLASS MAKER

Ingrid Stevens
All images courtesy of Sue MacGillivray

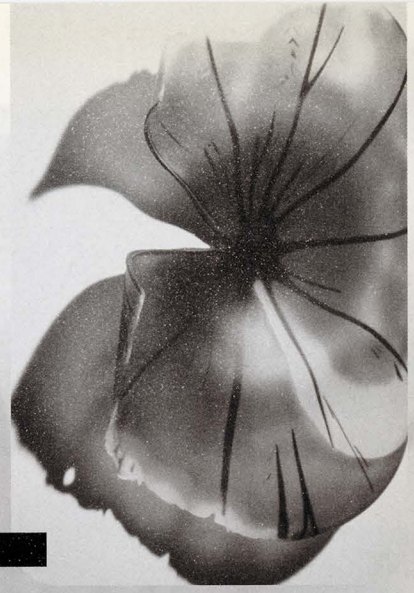
Sue MacGillivray is a young glass artist from Great Britain, who recently spent two years (1997-1998) in South Africa, helping to set up a glass facility for the Department of Fine and Applied Arts at the Technikon Pretoria. Simultaneously, she produced a body of work that earned her a Master's Degree in Glass from the University of Wolverhampton. The work she produced in South Africa was notably different from that she had made prior to her stay in South Africa, and the developments illustrate certain aspects of glass making and raise issues about design processes in general.

The position of the designer-maker is an interesting one. We often think of design as a rational process. As British critic Peter Fuller (1985:24) wrote, '[d]esign likes to present itself as clean-cut, rational and efficient'. However, design might rather be seen as a spectrum, stretching from the totally rational, for example, the electrical engineer, to the opposite end of the spectrum, the crafts person or designer-maker. The revival of hand-crafted production in the twentieth century has foregrounded less rational approaches to design, in which tacit knowledge, craft skills, the 'practical and aesthetic dimensions of human work' (Fuller 1985:219) and other forces and motivations play a part in the production of objects. Here the design process is necessarily complex and as much sub-conscious as conscious. Fuller (1999:218) celebrates this craft revival as 'the re-affirmation of a unity between conception and making'.

Studio glass is a relative newcomer to the field of crafts. Although hot or blown glass has been made for centuries, it required large furnaces to keep a mass of glass, sufficient for economical working, molten. As glass became increasingly industrialised in the nineteenth century, glassmakers like Lalique, Gallé and Steuben produced items commercially on a large scale, because this was the only economically and logistically viable option. Only in the 1960s did glassmakers realise that it was possible to work 'alone, directly and creatively with glass' (Layton 1996:26). Various American pioneers, like Harvey Littleton, a potter fascinated by glass, working with Dominick Labino, an artist and scientist, developed these new ways of working glass. Labino, for example, developed a special formula for glass that would become molten at a relatively low temperature (Cousins 1995:85-86). This major technical development changed the way glass was manufactured: it allowed a smaller amount of glass, sufficient for a single item, to be worked from a small kiln. This could be done by a smaller team of crafts people, or even by an individual, in a studio. So studio glass became possible, and glass blowing was able to break away from the industrial base that had always been necessary for the elaborate and expensive equipment and larger teams previously required. The so-called 'International Studio Glass Movement' (Cousins 1995:86) was born. Its founders of the 1960s, such as Harvey Littleton, Marvin Lipofsky and Dale Chihuly, are still working.

The Victorian critic John Ruskin had pleaded for hand-made glass almost a hundred years earlier. In *The stones of Venice* (1851), he rejected the Victorian preference for neatly finished, perfectly formed cut-glass and wished instead for objects that 'respected the material's intrinsic characteristics … its ductility, the plastic qualities inherent in molten glass' (in Cousins 1995:4). With the development of studio glass in the late twentieth century, such objects were finally possible. Glass, like other crafts such as ceramics and textiles before it, underwent a revival of the handcrafted object that is ongoing. Glass was subsequently introduced as a creative medium at colleges and universities.

Sue MacGillivray studied glassmaking at Stourbridge College of Technology and Art, and then at the University of Wolverhampton, Great Britain. Figure 5 is an example of her student work. As might be expected, these early pieces show little originality of approach, but considerable technical expertise.[1] Fuller (1985:244) writes of the process of throwing clay on a potter's wheel: 'there is nothing quite like throwing in any other craft'. Perhaps he never watched a studio glass blower at work, but the latter is infinitely more technically complex and astonishing to watch. The red-hot, liquid material must be spun, centred, manipulated by strength of arm and hand, and shaped by the breath, into its



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5. ***Sue MacGillivray***
Platter, student work, 1986.

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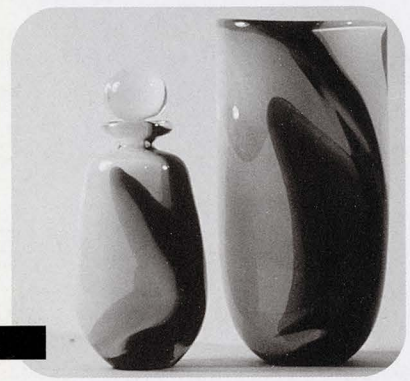

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6-7. ***Sue MacGillivray Dartington Crystal*** *Perfume bottles, 1995.*

final form. Unlike ceramics, where processes of shaping, decorating and heating follow each other, allowing time for pause, planning and re-consideration, in glass blowing the shape, colour and much of the decorative surface must be achieved simultaneously, as an integral part of a rapid process of designing-making. Glass blowing involves

> manipulating the hot molten material in the flames of the furnace [using] the elemental quality of fire to create monumental yet dynamic shapes in liquid glass ... harnessing colour, texture and mass in order to capture that poetical abstraction between light and form which is possible only in glass (Cousins 1995:58).

Dormer (1994:13) writes about the acquisition of such craft skills, and their position *vis-à-vis* the object. He refers to 'tacit knowledge', that craft knowledge or practical knowledge that is an integral part of the making as well as the meaning of any handcrafted object.[2] He believes that such craft knowledge is generally undervalued by contemporary western society and seen as being somehow intuitive, easy to acquire or untheoretical. But it is, he asserts

> ... generally disciplined knowledge, as disciplined as applied science. Craft knowledge also makes use of a concrete, precise verbal and written language ... [as well as] the physical processes involving the physical handling of the medium. ... difficult to learn and slow to acquire (Dormer 1994:17-30).

Thus, the craft skills that underlie such seemingly simple pieces of glass should not be underestimated, nor their contribution to the final appearance and even to the 'meaning' of the piece undervalued. Nor should the fact that the designing and making process involve hand-crafting skills lead one to dismiss them as somehow outdated: they are a technology as relevant and recent as any other. The processes of glass making involve both advanced technology and design. The acquisition of craft skills, to the degree that the processes seem 'easy', requires integration of technology and design so that 'the potential of design to transform technology from the unattainable and miraculous to the "everyday"' (Southwell 1997:3) is realised.

MacGillivray[3] states that she based her early plates on decorative natural forms, for example butterflies and flowers, attempting to relate their physical lightness to the more metaphorical 'lightness' of glass. She says she was concerned, perhaps in a naïve way, with integrating craftsmanship, function and beauty.

After qualifying with a BA (Honours) in Glass Making and Design and gaining further experience as a glass maker's assistant, MacGillivray was employed at Dartington Crystal in Devon.[4] The factory is internationally known for glass that is hand-blown, although one must distinguish between studio glass designed and made by an individual designer-maker, and glass made by hand in a factory situation such as Dartington, by larger teams and with far more repetition of items and ranges. The designer has less control over the whole process and less input into the final object, thus losing the flexibility to change, expand or explore the original intention or design (Dormer 1994:31). Such industrial design might be seen as

> ... a form of ideal art. The essence of the designer's work is to create a plan from which other people can make, usually in quantity, perfect objects which require no modification during construction and which do not require the designer to be on hand giving instructions. In reality [such] a design is usually the creation, not of one person, but of a team ... (Dormer 1994:81).

A designer in such an enterprise is constrained by many factors: economic considerations, the company image and 'look', demands of the market, the team approach to making, as well as considerations of materials and processes. Dartington has a company 'style' that is based on simplicity, on clear glass with little or no colour, on functionality and, generally, on a conservative Modernist aesthetic.

MacGillivray was first employed as an assistant glass maker, then as leader of a team of glass blowers,[5] finally as a designer. She initially designed studio items, making prototypes that were transferred to the smaller production ranges, such as sets of perfume bottles (Figures 6,7). Finally, she designed factory lines that are still in production, such as *The Carousel Collection* (Figures 8-10). She designed both on paper and by making experimental prototypes, and these designs then went into production, becoming established ranges if commercially successful.

The glasses, vases, cake plates, bowls and candlesticks of *The Carousel Collection*, in lead crystal, are functional, and fit into the company's ethos of simple Modernist design. Functionality itself could be seen as a decisive factor in such design, although, as Fuller (1985:24) points out, 'pure "Functionalism" is, and indeed always has been, a myth; taste enters deeply even into design decisions which purport to have elimi-

nated it'. For him 'the relationship between the practical and aesthetic dimensions of human work is always complicated', as even the most seemingly simple, seemingly functional object has an aesthetic dimension, and is part of the 'shared symbolic order' (Fuller 1985:219,220). The appearance of these objects might thus be attributed more to Modernism than to any notions about functionality.

Modernism became part of the vocabulary of glass very early. For example, British glassmaker Christopher Dresser's glass, made before his death in 1904, abandoned all ornamentation in favour of austerity and utter simplicity, predating the Bauhaus by fifty years (Cousins 1995:70-71). Modernism in glass was further developed by the dominant Swedish glass factories, and it was their influence that established the style at a factory such as Dartington.[6] The rigour of this approach is such that certain qualities inherent in glass, for example, intensity of colour and variety of texture, must be eliminated in favour of qualities that are perceived to be more 'pure', such as transparency and translucency.

It was perhaps this austerity, even sterility, that contributed to the demise of Modernism as a driving force in design. Certainly, by the time MacGillivray came to South Africa, she was ready to overthrow any such stylistic constraints. Furthermore, her working environment and, indeed, her general surroundings in South Africa were so different from her previous milieu in England, that a radical shift in her approach to design production was hardly surprising.

The technical and logistical situation in a glass facility in its infancy, such as that at Technikon Pretoria, was vastly different from that in an established factory. Furnaces had to be designed and built, studios established, tools had to be sourced and often made. Even a material as essential as glass had to be mixed and tested using local raw materials, while other substances, like the chemicals used for colouring hot glass, had to be imported.[7] Thus, all work produced in the first years was experimental, a factor that, for MacGillivray with her technical expertise, became a liberating rather than a limiting factor. She began to handle glass in what were, to her, unconventional ways: combining it with other materials such as clay and bronze;[8] blowing then slicing into its different coloured layers when cool, then reheating and reblowing; stacking and gluing glass units. Whilst she was now freed from commercial constraints and the restrictions of designing to strict briefs, she was challenged to make individual pieces, entirely self-generated but sophisticated enough in design, concept and technique to satisfy the standards of a Master's degree in glass, in an environment with narrower technological resources than those of any British studios.

Being in Africa for a length of time was also a decisive influence in her design development. She states that she did not want to make 'African' art, but responded to her environment and circumstances. She began to collect images that interested her: Ndebele beadwork, Zulu dress, and Ife heads from Nigeria (Figures 11,12). She was particularly interested in the formal qualities of these images: the linear scarification of Ife heads, the multiple nature of beadwork and neck rings, the stacked forms, and the patterns created not on surfaces but rather through the underlying methods of construction. She found similar patterns in local natural forms: ringed stems of palm trees, spirals on horns and fanned leaves. She began blowing vessel-shaped units, which retained her roots in vessel making, but these were re-worked by loose, textural cutting through the layers of coloured glass, by stacking and by combination with other materials. The resulting pieces were a series of totemic shapes that retained references to the vessel but were now non-functional, or had a decorative rather than a utilitarian function. They show a joyous interplay of brilliant colour, contrasts of translucency and opacity, with varieties of textures, shapes and surfaces (Figures 1-4).

They bear a complex relationship to an African influence. MacGillivray, like Picasso and many European artists before her, was 'not interested in the social context or meaning of African artefacts but in their formal qualities' (Davison 1990:40). This kind of eclecticism could be criticised. For example, Dormer (1994:95) states

> [t]here is a debt to pay for eclecticism: foreigners may seize upon other people's craft and art but they often get it wrong. They get it wrong in part because what they are looking for is what interests them, and not what was necessarily of interest to the native artist or his or her indigenous audience. ... One may view this as cultural appropriation or cultural colonialism ... What they do with what they take is sometimes inferior, and always different to that produced by the primary culture.


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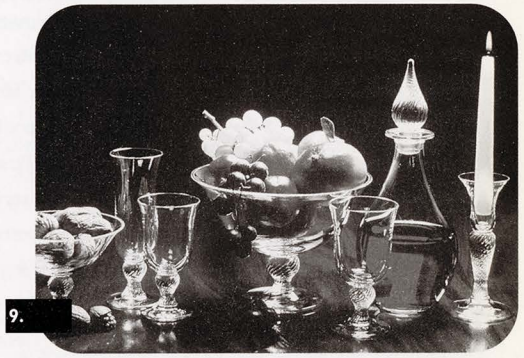
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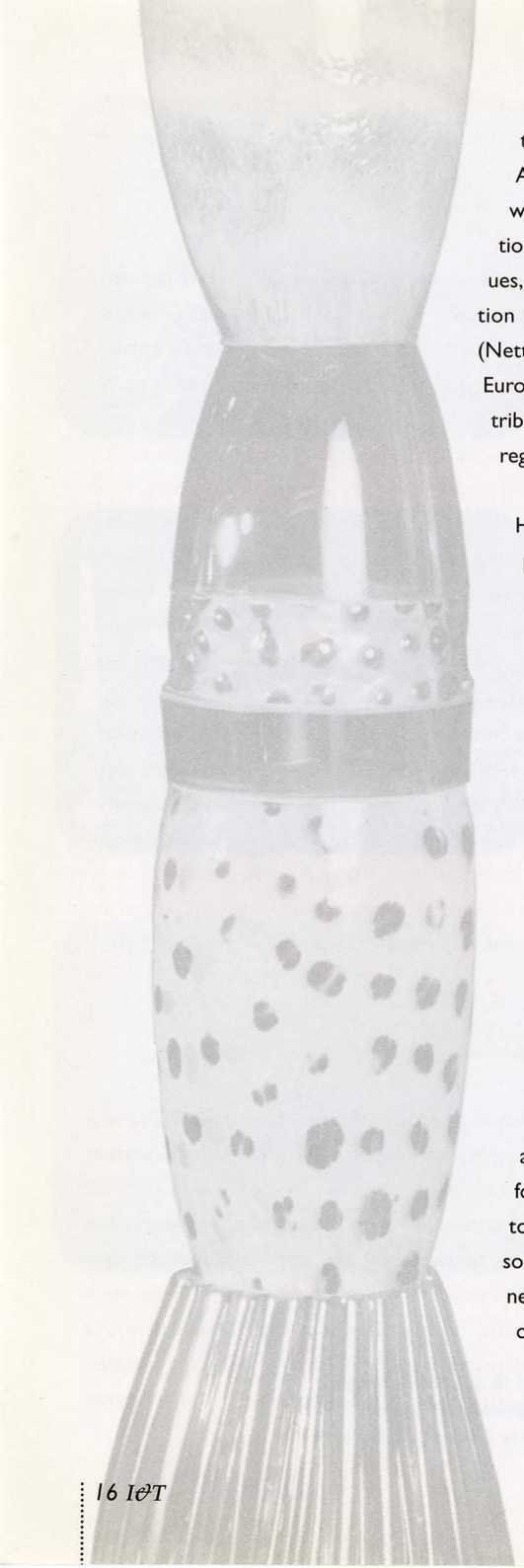
8-10. ***Sue MacGillivray***
Dartington Crystal
The Carousel Collection, 1996.



MacGillivray could then be said to be guilty of cultural appropriation, of not understanding the African objects that inspired her, of 'getting it wrong'. She was not interested in the cultural function of these traditional objects, in their social values, symbolic dimensions, or their complex integration of ritual, function, symbol and ornament (Nettleton & Hammond-Tooke 1989). Like many European artists, she could be seen to have 'contributed to the perpetuation of entrenched ideas regarding Africa' (van Eeden 1995:4).[9]

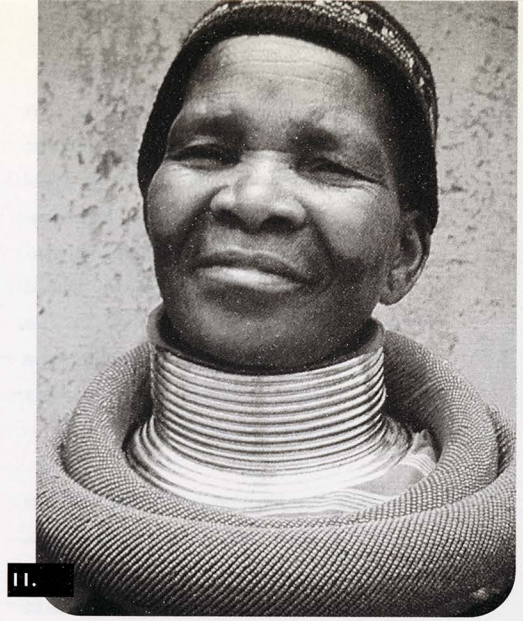
However, such criticism is hard to sustain in a postmodern era, where eclecticism is widespread, a strategy of many artists and designers, even a positive force in a renewal of design. Postmodernism is a cultural condition characterised by 'the appropriation, misappropriation, montage, collage, hybridisation and general mixing up' referred to by Sulieman (1991:118), and a network of cross-cultural influences is inherently part of the present. Furthermore, as Hammond-Tooke (Nettleton & Hammond-Tooke 1989:16) points out, although traditional African art is intensely symbolic and meaningful, all symbols also have a 'sensory pole' carried in their form rather the content of their messages. This probably applies particularly to decorative arts in Africa, where 'it is the sensory pole that has overwhelming ascendance'. So to respond to a particular aspect of African art, such as selected formal qualities, is not so much to 'get it wrong' as to freely interpret and re-contextualise one's sources of inspiration. Traditional African art was never static or monolithic, but developed and changed in response to changing societies, different needs and outside influences (Wilkinson 1998:383-395).

MacGillivray's inspiration comes not only from Africa. She investigated other sources, for example, the stacked sculptures of Brancusi, and acknowledges a debt to certain postmodern designers such as Ettore Sottsass of the Memphis group. The ideas and approaches of this radical design group can serve to throw light on many contemporary crafted and designed objects, such as MacGillivray's later vessels.

The Memphis group, which started designing and producing in Milan in 1980, was concerned with avant-garde design in functional objects, this in spite of the fact that, generally, 'the *object d'art* is rarely at the forefront of the avant-garde' (Cousins 1995:8) because of constraints, previously mentioned, of function, mass production and public taste. The radical solutions of Memphis were eclectic, a mix of ideas from many cultures, situated in an age of mass communications and the explosion of information. To capture the attention of the public in an age of mass-media images 'necessitated the development of a more wilfully brash approach to design which could unsettle the public's predictable response to a table, a chair or a vase' (Cousins 1995:104).

One strategy was the use of materials in unexpected ways and combinations. According to Radice (1985:35), a critic closely associated with Memphis,

> [u]sing different materials provided not only new structural possibilities, but – above all – new semantic and metaphoric possibilities, other modes of communication, another language, and even a change of direction, a broadening of perspective, appropriation and digestion of new values and the concomitant rejection of traditional structures that renewal always involves.



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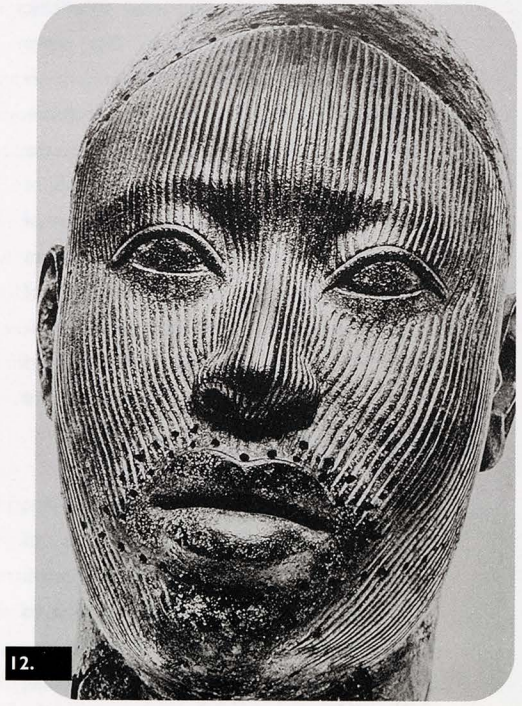

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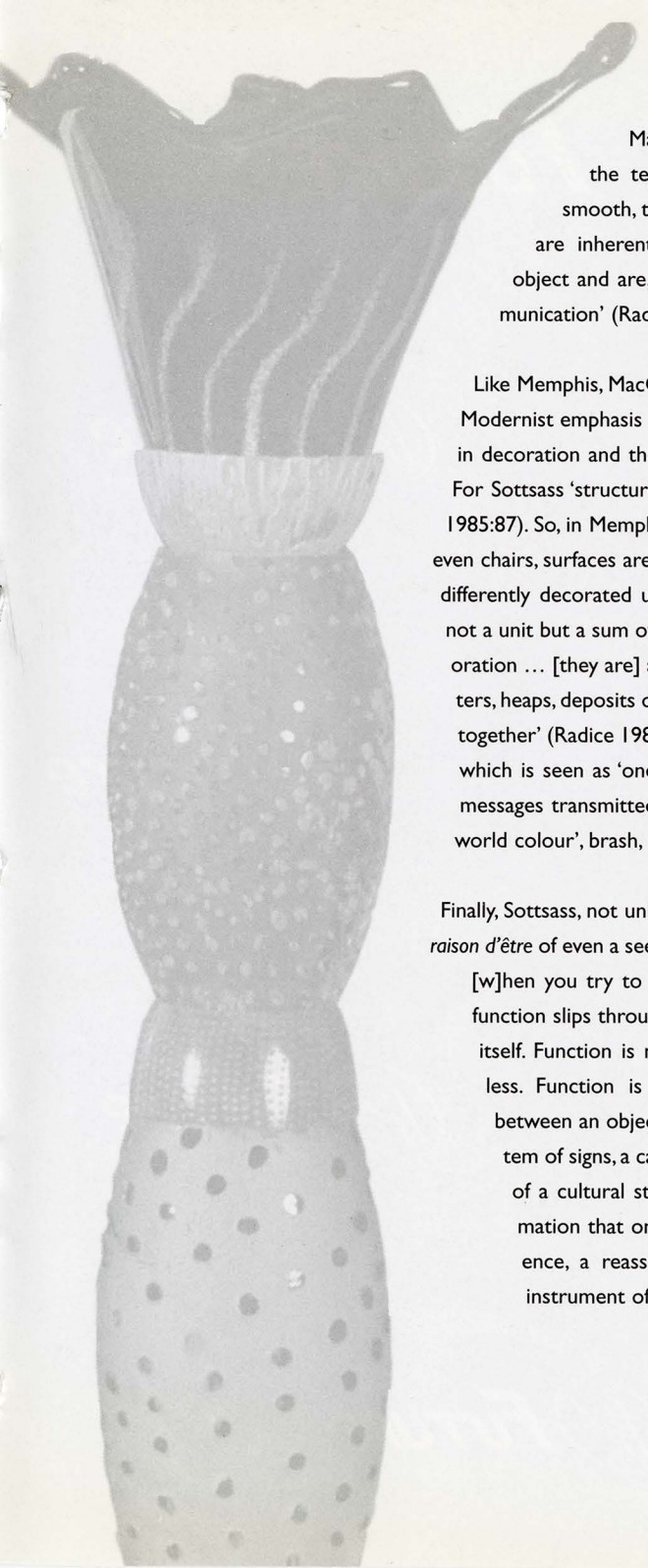
11. Ndebele beadwork, South Africa.
12. Ife head, Nigeria.



For the Memphis group, as for MacGillivray, materials and their properties, the textures, patterns and colours, rough with smooth, transparent with opaque, bronze with glass, are inherent to the meaning and significance of an object and are, in themselves 'a complex system of communication' (Radice 1985:67).

Like Memphis, MacGillivray's later work was a rejection of the Modernist emphasis on function in design, and showed a delight in decoration and the part that decoration plays within design. For Sottsass 'structure and decoration are one thing' (in Radice 1985:87). So, in Memphis-designed objects such as vases, teapots, even chairs, surfaces are not homogeneous, but are constructed of differently decorated units, as are MacGillivray's 'vases'. They are not a unit but a sum of many parts. Such objects are 'built by decoration … [they are] assemblages, agglomerates, multitudes, clusters, heaps, deposits of decorations that overlap, add up and flow together' (Radice 1985:88). They are also a celebration of colour, which is seen as 'one of the active ingredients of the complex messages transmitted' (Radice 1985:121-122). They have 'third-world colour', brash, intense, sensual, and artificial.

Finally, Sottsass, not unlike Fuller, rejects utilitarian function as the *raison d'être* of even a seemingly functional object like a vase or sofa:

> [w]hen you try to define the function of any object, the function slips through your fingers, because function is life itself. Function is not one screw more or one measure less. Function is the final possibility of the relation between an object and life. … An object exists as a system of signs, a catalyst of emotions, as a representation of a cultural state, as a container of values or information that one wants to possess, as an active presence, a reassuring wink – in other words, as an instrument of communication (Radice 1985:143).

So in these stacked 'vase' shapes by MacGillivray, perhaps we may read, variously, the experience of another continent and other cultures, a liberating exploration of material, shape and colour freed from the necessities of functionalism, a recovery of the decorative and the sensory and, finally, a re-invigoration of both design and craft. This is moreover part of the current vitality within the applied arts generally. To end, as I began, with Peter Fuller (1985:220):

> [a] living, developing stylistic tradition is one of the most important ways through which individual human subjects reconcile themselves to the brute existence of the social and physical worlds they are constrained to inhabit [and] in which an individual maker can celebrate his subjective joy in labour.

NOTES

1. Glass blowers from the Technikon Pretoria confirm that the blowing of open, platter-like shapes is technically difficult, requiring greater technical ability than, for instance, closed or bottle shapes.
2. Such tacit knowledge is, for Dormer as for William Morris, an essential aspect of the satisfaction and *raison d'être* of craftsmanship, part of 'a fulfilling life'. Both believed that 'humanly useful practical work was an integral part of any life that was worth living' (Dormer 1994:13).
3. Personal interview, Pretoria, November 1998.
4. Dartington Crystal was started in 1967 by the Dartington Hall Trust as a way of providing employment for local unemployed people in North Devon. It now employs 300 people and is Britain's leading manufacturer of crystal.
5. MacGillivray was the first woman to become a team leader in glass blowing at Dartington, entering what had, until then, been an essentially male environment.
6. A Swede, Eskil Vilhelmsson, was employed to establish Dartington. He recruited 16 skilled Swedish glass blowers as the initial workforce.
7. This is the first facility for teaching hot glass established at any sub-Saharan tertiary institution, so there were few, if any, local models to follow.
8. This development was, perhaps, encouraged by the close association between the glass facility and the existing ceramic and sculpture departments.
9. Van Eeden (1995:3-6) goes on to argue against this negative view of cultural appropriation, in a discussion of 'a more authentic approach to the retrieval and incorporation of African mystique' among certain contemporary South African artists and designers.

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