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International textile trends: curse or blessing?

This article questions the value of locally generated textile design set against the backdrop of annual international textile design trends. The question as to whether international textile trends are relevant as a source of inspiration to South African textile design, or whether local designers should create a unique brand of textile design, is analysed. Simultaneously, a synthesis of current international textile design trends for the 1996/1997 season is presented.

THE SCENE IS SET

Each year thousands of textile experts throughout the world research the past and analyse the present to forecast the future 'look' of the trade. The result is that both the global textile designer and the businessman have documents available which orient them to the foreseeable evolution of marketable textile trends. But to what degree should local textile designers yield to such forecasts?

To answer this question, one first has to sketch current trends displayed by major international textile shows. Europe is the chief host to a large number of textile shows which bring together professionals, and determine seasonal international textile design trends. The major trend-setting textile shows, their functions, country of operation, forecast season, and major trends forecast for 1996/1997 are summarised in the panels below.

HEIMTEX

1995

Frankfurt, Germany

Trend-setter in household design, i.e. furnishing, upholstery, bed-linen, curtaining, bathroom, carpets, etc.

January 1995 for summer 1996

1. ETHNIC

African, Asian, exotic, lyric, sensual, baroque, multi-coloured, sandy ochre, earthy brown, saffron yellow, indigo blue

2. NATURAL

soft, country, harmony, warmth of tradition, natural fibres, florals, beiges, domesticity, cocooning

3. ROMANTIC

white and transparent colours

4. MASCULINE

influence from past styles: re-cycled, symbolic prints, medieval, renaissance, heraldry, damasks, tapestries, brocades

Courtesy of Trade Consultants International

EXPOFIL

1995

Paris, France

Trend-setter for yarn colour trends and structure
June 1995 for summer 1996

Technologically rich yarn formulations for metallic, shiny fabrics and transparent finishes

Courtesy of Trade Consultants International

TEXTIL HOGAR

1995

Barcelona, Spain

Presenting textile trends for home furnishing and upholstery
Summer 1996

1. NATURAL

hand-made, anti-fashion, eco-business elements, respect for the environment, whites accented with floral motifs, checks, stripes, borders and braids

2. HUMAN

ethnicity, environment and its influence on Western culture, re-calling distant cultures and ethnias, from simple batik to lavish Oriental motifs, Berber stripes, borders, classic Madras and Scottish plaids, quilts

3. HISTORIC

cult of tradition, passion for antiques, small florals on gingham, plain colours, rounded shapes, *trompe d'oeil* (antiqued) cotton velvet, iconography of antique motifs on braids, re-interpretation of local motifs, hand-crafted and expressive naifs, history as a re-interpretative resource recalls the acanthus leaf, garlands, classic damasks, goblins, greens and blues

Courtesy of Trade Consultants International



DECOSIT

1995

Brussels, Belgium

Major trend-setting broad spectrum presentation
Summer 1996

GLOBAL HOME, GLOBAL HISTORY

Each house is a global home incorporating what we gather from other cultures or times. Ethnic curios, antique portraits, in contrast with a hyper-computerized world

1. COCKTAIL CURAÇOA

vibrant, ergonomic, perfect contrasts: red and green, yellow and blue

2. BIG MIX

culturally inspired brocades, velvets, museum pieces, exotic pieces, curios, *wunderkammer*, Warhol's 1950s monochromes

3. SORBETS

aquarelle, fresco, frosty crystals sketched in chalk

4. COFFEE BREAK

enduring colours, dark to heavily saturated, grey, black, blues

Courtesy of Trade Consultants International

THEMES AND TRENDS: WHAT DO THEY INDICATE?

The information on trends in textile design published by major trendsetting textile consultancies and magazines, and shown at major textile shows, indicates a few central ideologies or thought patterns. These include current global visions of democracy, nostalgia, ecological concern, the eclectic re-synthesis of previous traditions and styles, as well as a *fin-de-siècle* decadence.

These international trends seem to underwrite Italian scenarioist Marcel Benedito's (Castellano 1994: 46) argument that what is 'natural' appears to offer us an excellent platform from which to support the appeal

DECOSIT

1996

Brussels, Belgium

Summer 1997

ONE HOUSE, ONE MIND, ONE ROOM

The trend of true global communication is most important. The world is becoming a house and each house is a world of its own. There is room for everything, everyone and influences from all over.

1. THE MOVING ROOM

transient, mood and chance findings dictate, recycled plastics, synthetics in bold, bright, orange colours, green and turquoise, fluorescent red and violet in contrast with whites

2. THE CONTACT ROOM

gathering of styles and tastes, sun-colours, ethnic-inspired, repetition, eclectic mixture of objects from abroad, warm midtones, citrine, orange, red, brown, watery green, Mediterranean blue

3. THE THINKING ROOM

perfect quality, authenticity, open to technology, futurist: innovative, rich, iridescent, clear white, silvery-gold, grey; nostalgic: elegant craftsmanship, rich, shades of brown and green blue.

Courtesy of Trade Consultants International

range of current international textile goods. 'Ecological' concerns play a major role in laying out a ground plan according to which textile trends can be formally and technically adapted to suit the homes of the year 2000. Benedito (Castellano 1994: 46) identifies a current belief that global society is engulfed in a powerful sensitivity that infiltrates every human activity, and that totally conditions the aspect and quality of the fabrics that surround it, the clothing of its environment and itself.

Benedito therefore describes the 1990s as characterised by a central theme conditioned by a worldwide cultural experience and current concerns which generate specific pre-occupations. This has led to an ideological structure of ecology: subjects of ECOLOGY and NATURE have become the *leitmotif* of a great number of collections. ECLECTICISM is the ideological shortcut used to support any aesthetic proposal, and the term POSTMODERN has been used to disguise the old trick of resorting to textile archives. In a time dominated by the conservation of nature, art and design have also become veritable conservers.

IDENTIFYING THEMES

Assisting in the verbalisation of certain international trends, the Institute of Textile Technology (AITEX), established in Spain in 1987, offers an important service by researching, analyzing and structuring design proposals developed by its Design and Fashion Department. These proposals, along with others especially from Environnement Maison (France), Dansk Mode Institut (Denmark), Deutsches Mode-Institut (Germany) and Die Modedesigner (Germany), originate and synthesise trends which will be presented at the major annual textile shows listed in the panels above.

AITEX in particular provides textile designers and companies with a working document which they may use to define, under imaginative and realistic direction, a season's aesthetic trends in fabrics for the home and decoration market. Trends defined in a range of annual publications, are keyed in colour, contrasts, innovation, and the creation of new products, not only in materials, finishes and motifs.

The aesthetic proposals of the 1996/1997 season, as reflected firstly at the major international textile shows, and subsequently in various textile publica-

tions, reveal a triple craze. NATURE including floral themes; ETHNIC, from the western traveller's point of view and SPIRITUAL.

Three great themes originated by AITEX are protagonists of these trends and contain in them the face of the season:

'Time to look and look-again' (incorporating the graphic elements of the computer spirit and technologic novelties applied with soft aesthetics or a 'silver-toned' 1950s and 1960s connotation),

'Time to meet and re-encounter' (the Orient and Mexico are reference points for the traveller who collects miniature souvenirs, *Empire* style motifs and 'gold-toned' scenes), and

'Time to feel and touch-again' (with copper both as a colour and as a metal combined with soft, velvet textures, flowers, warm forest greens and vegetal motifs inspired by the Surrealist artist Frida Kahlo.)

A GLOBAL IDEOLOGY IS CONFIRMED...

After much debate, comparison and canvassing by manufacturers and designers, seasonal trends are established. A closer look at Decosit 1995, reveals trends pertaining to 1996/1997 from international textile manufacturers which fit effortlessly into the current ideology of Postmodernism:

Fussenegger (Austria) launched a printed polycotton jacquard and a heavy cotton print in direct response to customer demands of ecological concern;

St Hubert (Belgium) launched a collection with a classical theme and Regency stripes because there is still a good market for them in a global vacuum dedicated to recycling eclectic and nostalgic motifs;

Wilson Wilcox (United Kingdom) presented a richly decadent *fin-de-siècle* collection of jacquards and heavy damasks in polycotton with designs ranging from geometric to floral to the Canterbury Tales, as

well as the addition of bright limes and oranges of the Ajanta Indians;

Covington (America) launched a new sanded 100% cotton fabric aimed at the middle to upper end of the upholstery market, again meeting eco-centred ideologies;

Bruder Baumann (Austria) followed the 'eco-trend' towards highly textured fabrics, richly woven jacquards and 100% cotton cloths;

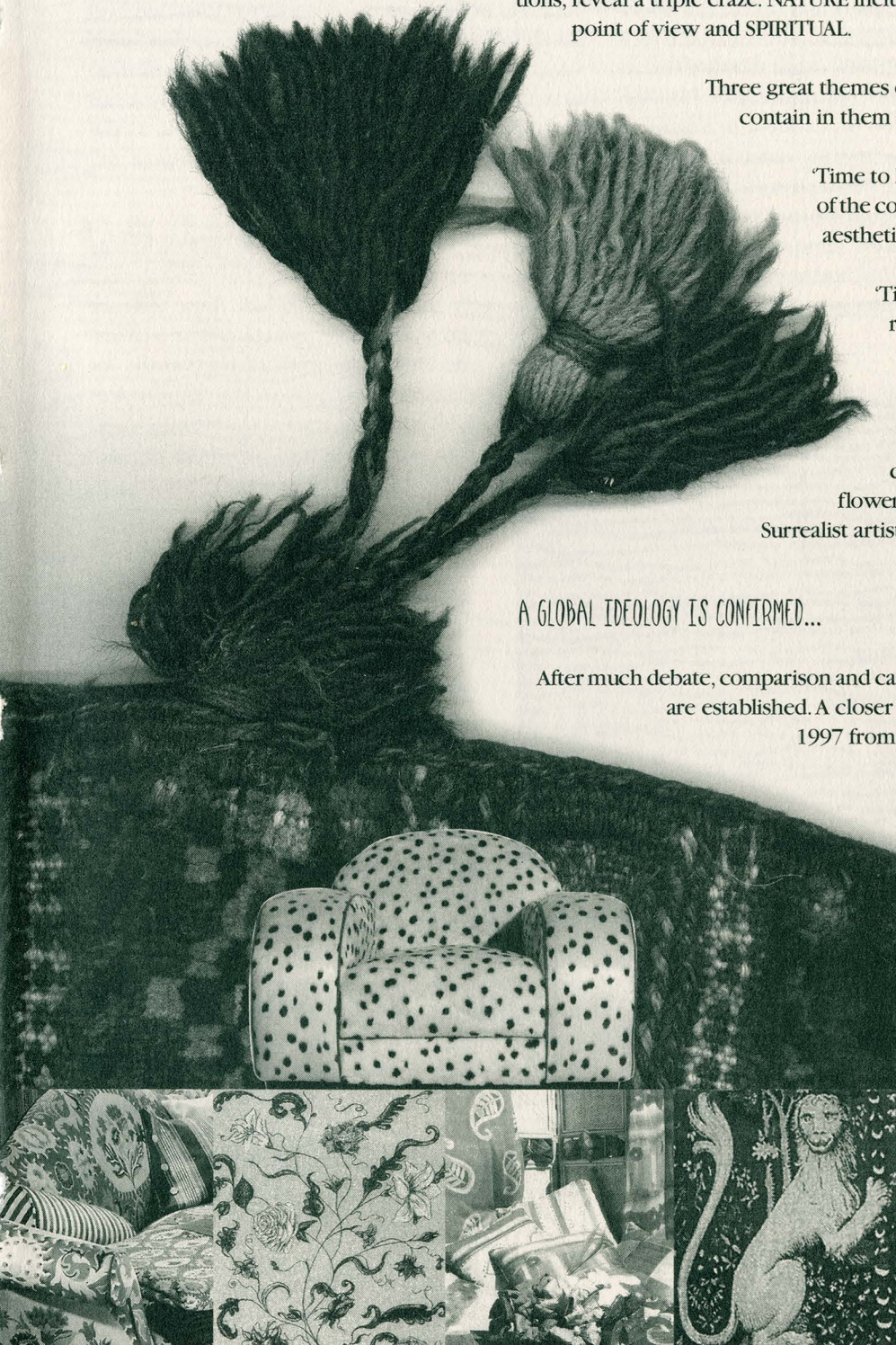
Aste/Faber & Becker (Germany) also presented heavily textured fabrics inspired by the Modernist pieces by the artist Antoni Tapies (Hirst 1995: 84).

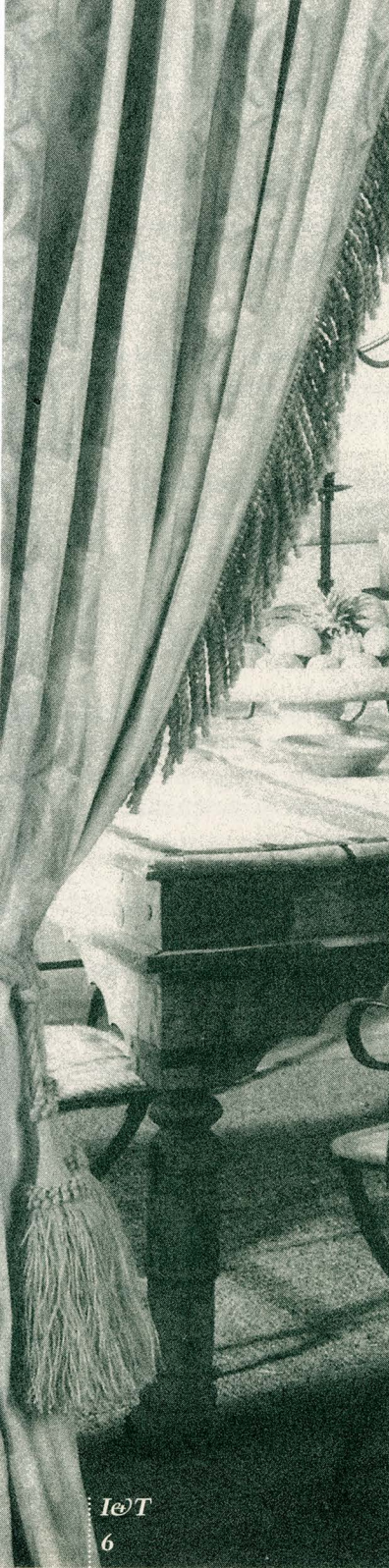
FROM INTERNATIONAL TRENDS TO LOCAL FLAIR...

Coming back to our initial question of whether international textile trends are relevant to local design, or whether local designers should create an unique brand of textiles, it is important to sketch the hierarchy of local textile design.

In a local country - i.e. a country which did not participate in composing the fashion trends of a particular season, such as South Africa - the latent excitement generated by the annual release of international trends, bring local textile designers face to face with the pressing need of turning international creative input into productive and profitable local ranges. The lure of the 'exotic' has to be adjusted in order to generate marketable local fabrics.

Decorex, South Africa's premier event for the development and presentation of all areas of the local decor and design industry, adopted a 'Bold Inspiration' agenda in 1995 to showcase South Africa's unique blend of Eurocentric and Ethnocentric styles as forthcoming local trends. Decorex, like its European coun-





terparts, serendipitously arranges the meeting of manufacturers, suppliers, designers and decorators operating in the decorating and furnishing industry. This mission statement presents a backdrop for local and international design hybridisation. One important concern is whether international trends ought simply to be 'regurgitated' as local design, implying that local textile design is limited to international input only.

In this regard, Dr Ben Ngubane, former Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, stated in 1995 that Decorex aspired to create personal interest in decor style which should stimulate the need in all communities to take active pride in their home environment. Allan Fennell, Chairman of the South African Guild of Interior Designers (SAGID), suggests that local designers should take foreign trends (in the same way as the United Kingdom or America take Ndebele patterns and beadwork) and use them in original and novel ways. By doing this, foreign designs can become the vehicles by which local and international interest is awakened in locally produced articles.

According to Nicola Hadfield, organiser of Decorex, timeless elegance with eclectic blends of old and new were important trends for the 1996 season. She would like to see the emergence of a New South African style which emphasises the use of local materials. A 'New' philosophy should include an agenda for the inclusion of previously omitted groups and motifs. She feels it is important to strike a balance between international and local design (Hadfield 1995: 45).

It would appear that Africa can serve as an inspiration to local and international designers. The year 1995 and the subsequent 1996 season saw a move away from neutral colours to vibrant, rainbow colours reminiscent of Southern African flora and soil. Julia Twigg, member of the International Designers and Decorators Association (IDDA), stated that because South Africa became a focus point as a result of World Cup Rugby and politics, there was a noticeable swing in European decorating. Art dealer Trent Read states that sales to overseas buyers of African, particularly Venda, sculptures have increased since the elections (Hadfield 1995: 47). The influence of the Lost City at Sun City also encourages the increased inclusion of the glamour and tradition of rich African themes. This international trend not only includes African influences, but also incorporates Balinese, Chinese and Indian ideologies and styles.

Local designers ought to develop local flavours into a strong, home-bred agenda in conjunction with usable and relevant international textile design trends which will keep local customers satisfied and international buyers hunting for more. Lionel Levin, a highly respected interior designer specialising in the local and international commercial market, warns that South African designers need to become more innovative and develop their own style. Levin observes that local designers will still derive ideas and inspiration from overseas sources since the choice is always bigger, but not necessarily better (Hadfield 1995).

Johannes Boshoff, interior designer for King Goodwill Zwelithini and Dr Ben Ngubane, believes that South Africa has an unique design heritage from which to draw, but that we do not utilise it sufficiently. Africa is rich in TRADITION, wealthy in COLOUR, STYLE and RESOURCES which should reflect the vigour and grandeur of Africa.

To further analyse the responsibilities of local textile design, it is interesting to look at the actions of other local markets. These markets include those who are not directly involved in forecasting international tex-

tile design trends. Internationally, for example, Italian upholstery manufacturer B&B Italia, incorporated a Research and Development Centre 'think-tank' in order to create collections reflecting the company's exclusive character, taste and personality without having to 'lift' them from other manufacturers (Contini 1995: 68). When designers concentrate on international products they have to know the foreign market down to the smallest details - from TASTE TRENDS to LIFESTYLES to expectations - to be able to offer a product that is recognisably 'made at home' but also close to the tastes of the country it is marketed in. B&B Italia recommend using information on trends only if it provides reliable signals of what course to take (Contini 1995: 68). The most im-

portant signals for the 1996/1997 season are colours with fewer Armani type shades being requested outside Italy, and the importance of greys and blacks in Switzerland, Germany and Holland.

It should also be kept in mind that textile designers present luxury products. Fabrics are imbued with fashionable and luxurious meaningfulness as demanded by higher echelon households who love to travel and gather a range of eclectic souvenirs as the





basis of their decor. Susan Crewe, editor of *House and Garden* (UK), stated at Decorex 1996 that PALE, uncluttered interiors are appearing, not at the whim of interior decorators pronouncing 'the nineties are neutral', but because of an INSTINCTIVE global need for our homes to appear more tranquil (Hadfield 1996: 51). This reminds us of the concept of 'cocooning' popularised by Faith Popcorn (Popcorn & Marigold 1996: 232) in which every home becomes a 'world of its own'. With this information in mind, one can argue that international textile trends can indeed guide the local designer in a specific global direction which will remain fashionable for at least a period of two to five years.

According to T&J Vestor, the association which groups Italy's best textiles trade publications, fabric designs alone do not have the trend-setting power that fashionable clothing, launched at the annual *Prêt-à-Porter* catwalk shows in Paris, has (Contini 1995:69). In home-furnishing textiles, the consumer comes to accept a style or a colour only after fashion has decreed it and made it its own. This involves a digestion process that takes a certain amount of time and that has to be respected. Designers should take heed of this fact and not try to present or introduce totally foreign themes (such as Guatemalan colours and shapes) into a society addicted to current fashion trends. Creativity by itself no longer guarantees success. South African textile designers have to really know the foreign market (tastes, trends, demands) to be able to do something different that will still be acceptable.

Textile design is ultimately a community service. Therefore, international trends should be adapted to compete with and fulfil local flavours and tastes. According to Maurizio Favetta, an Italian industrial designer with King Size, Milan, it is important for a local country to delve into design HISTORY and update certain formal codes that already reside in the public's UNCONSCIOUS (Contini 1995: 71). Favetta works on layers of experience, memory and languages that can be felt in every environment. He believes that the local designer can trace certain tendencies in a changing society which is moving towards global contexts. These tendencies are more than anything, ways of behaving and lifestyles, they are not and must not be interpreted as rigid cages in which to put objects or anything else. This information presents the local designer with practical methods for creating a 'New' South African design style: international trends need to be deconstructed and mixed with the richness of local histories, codes, memories and patterns.

South African textile designers are therefore left with two creative choices: they can create local textile designs via the historically-conscious adaptation of international trends, or they can feverishly fabricate a vibrant range of local, community-inspired fabrics which can ultimately become better export quality products. There is currently an urgent demand from local fashion designers and decorators for locally inspired fabrics which are coloured by the stories, allegories, textures, patterns and amalgamations of a literally untapped historical richness which is AFRICA.

It seems as though international textile trends indeed comprise a blessing disguised as a curse: the industry favours international input because it manufactures luxury goods which are bought by privileged up-market fashion, retail and home buyers. On the other hand, these international design trends stymie the emergence of an honest 'New' Southern African design philosophy which makes good design an affordable choice for all. In the final analysis, the need for true reconciliatory ethics as well as the Postmodern 'inclusion' of global and democratic needs, must constitute the ideological framework for local textile design. After all, the customer is King...

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This article owes much of its information on current trends to TRADE CONSULTANTS INTERNATIONAL, a consultant service for textile manufacturers and international exporters based in Belgium.

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