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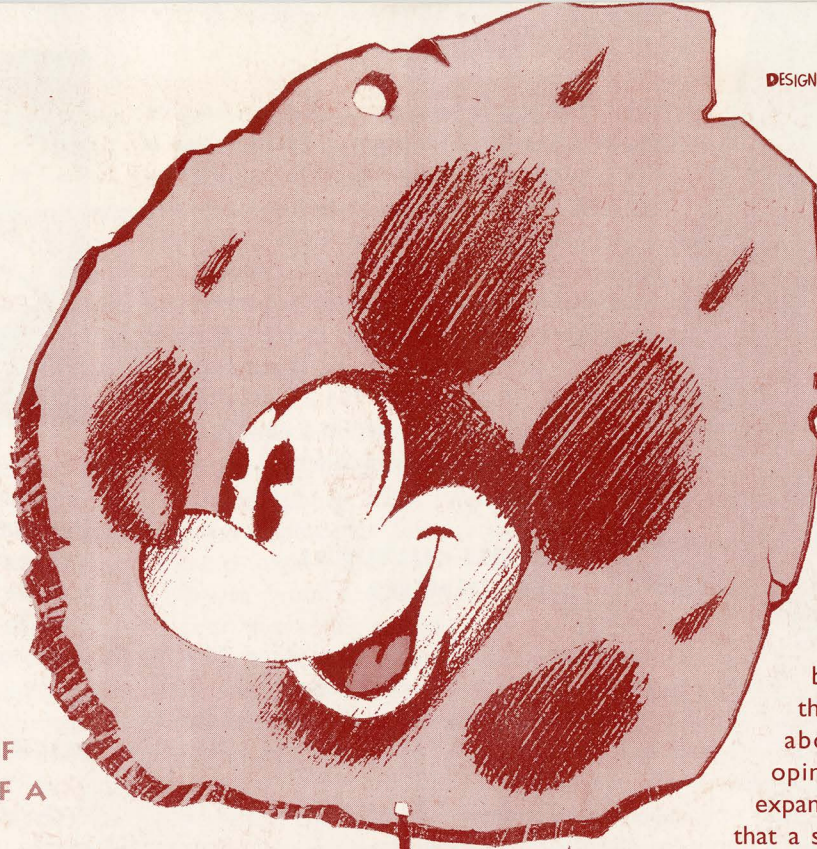


CONTEMPORARY CULTURE
WORLDWIDE HAS ACCORDED
MICKEY MOUSE AND OTHER
DISNEY CHARACTERS AN AURA AND MYSTIQUE
OF TIMELESSNESS AND UNCHANGEABILITY:
POINTS OF STABILITY AND CONTINUITY IN A
WORLD WHERE EXPENDABILITY AND PLANNED
OBSCOLESCENCE HAVE COME TO TYPIFY CONSUMER
CULTURE. DISNEY HAS COME TO SIGNIFY MAGIC,
FANTASY AND A WORLD OUT OF TIME. SIMILARLY,
THE STEREOTYPICAL WESTERN CONSTRUCTION OF
'AFRICA' HAS FABRICATED THE MYTHOLOGY OF A
CONTINENT DESERVING

...TO BE SEEN AND SAVOURED IN WAYS THAT
DEFY THE PASSAGE OF...HISTORY - IN ALL ITS
STRANGENESS AND GLORY, MIRACULOUSLY
UNAFFECTED BY ITS COLONIAL AND POST-
COLONIAL PAST (POWELL 1995:8).

VISIONS OF AFRICA

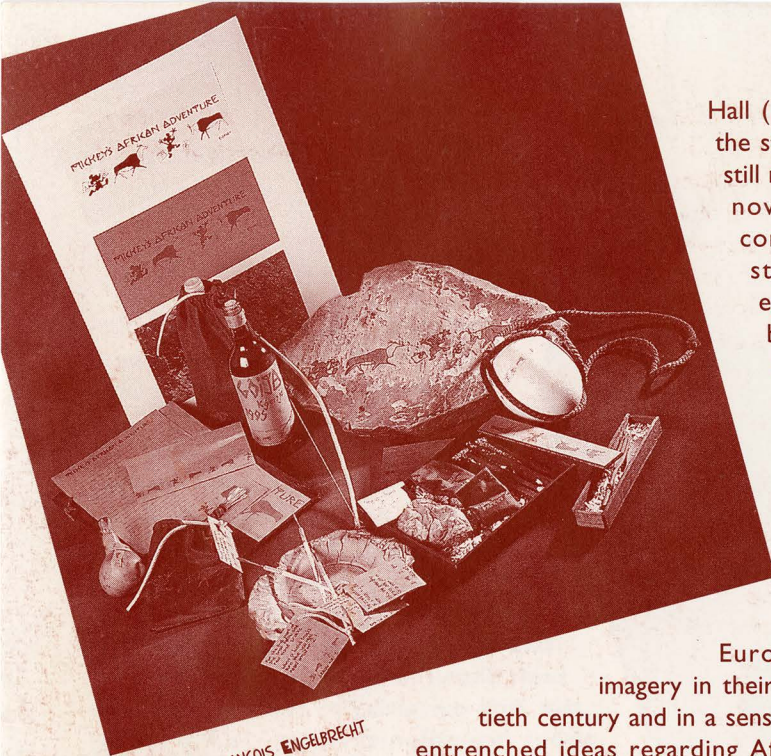
Current revisionist theory has questioned the validity of stereotypes of gender, race and country that have been constructed by processes of tradition and the politics of representation. Much work in this regard has been done, for example, to explicate Western perceptions of the Orient, and by the same token the idea that Africa has been the invention of specific historical perceptions is



being explored by current scholarship. Seminal in this regard has been the contribution by Annie Coombes in *Reinventing Africa* (1994).

Hamilton (1994) has shown that the 'invention of Africa' was inextricably bound up with the colonial imagination and with the dissemination of ideologies perpetuated by tradition. She suggests that the 'hidden transcript' of Africa has been obscured by subsequent discourses that limit our ability to retrieve knowledge about pre-colonial Africa. Hall's (1994) opinions may be used to corroborate and expand upon this conviction. He has indicated that a specific Western attitude, initiated by the writings of figures such as Rider Haggard, led to the imaging of Africa by Europe in a very distinctive manner during the nineteenth century. Hall furthermore contends that as a result of a long process of narrative and visual imaging, Africa came to be regarded as a legendary Utopian lost paradise, associated with the promises of incredible wealth, mythical timelessness and sexual freedom.

The perception thus arose during the nineteenth century that Africa was an exotic playground for Europeans in search of adventure, riches, discovery and fame, which was in most respects not in concordance with the painful reality of a continent that was the target of continual colonial exploitation.



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Hall (1994) has argued that this vision became the standard way of looking at Africa, which is still manifested in Hollywood films and popular novels set in Africa, as well as in the conceptualization of the Lost City. This stereotypical vision was a convenient encapsulation and has therefore proved to be extremely enduring. Even Gold Reef City is comparable to a Disney theme park (Wolfaardt 1994:2), in which a specific frozen moment from history is commodified and marketed.

CROSS-CULTURAL TENDENCIES

European artists have been using African imagery in their work since the early years of the twentieth century and in a sense they contributed to the perpetuation of entrenched ideas regarding Africa. In recent years a more authentic approach to the retrieval and incorporation of African mystique has been noticeable among artists in South Africa as, for example, in the work of William Kentridge. Kentridge has taken characters from Western literature who carry considerable mythological and archetypal significance, such as Faust and Wozzeck, and has transposed them to African contexts in his multi-media productions of *Woyzeck on the Highveld* and *Faustus in Africa*. The appropriation and inclusion of the European tradition with the African serves to consolidate the universality of human experience, irrespective of context, and neither tradition is demeaned in the process.

One could continue this process of cultural symbiosis and attempt to create an African context for another famous Western icon, namely Mickey Mouse. The difference is, however, that Mickey is considered to be representative of



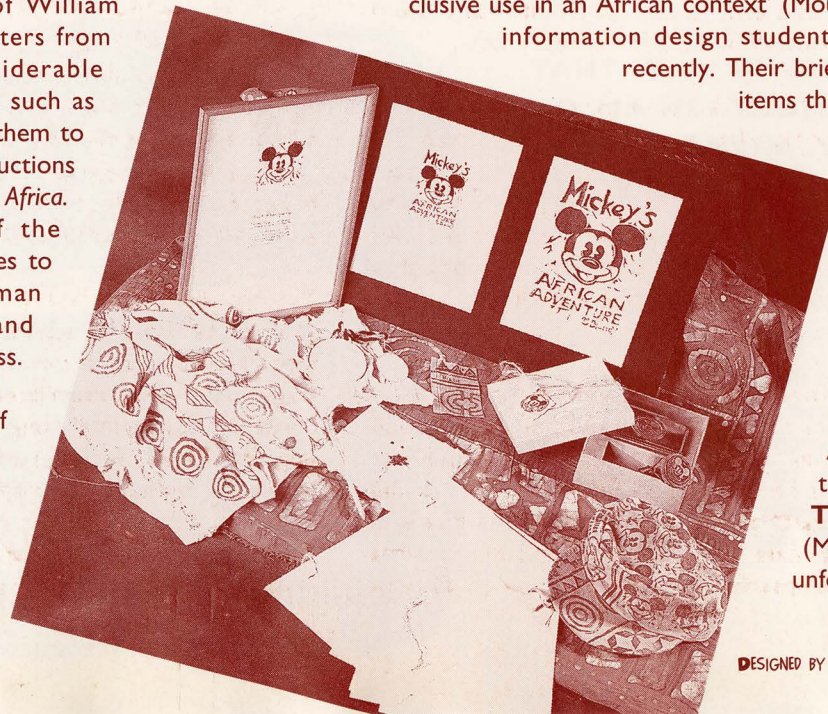
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old style cultural imperialism and Western consumer culture. The major critics of Disney culture such as Harold Bloom have indeed lamented the cultural homogenisation that inevitably results under the influence of Disney, and others have accused Disney culture of sexism, racism and a simplistic and biased view of history (Landsberg 1995:7).

When creating an African Mickey, the temptation might therefore be overwhelming to revert to those glib stereotypes mentioned above, and to only use superficial motifs that would evoke the style, but not necessarily the soul of Africa. In other words, a perpetuation of cultural colonisation might be the end result, traces of which can be discerned in the Disney film *The Lion King*.

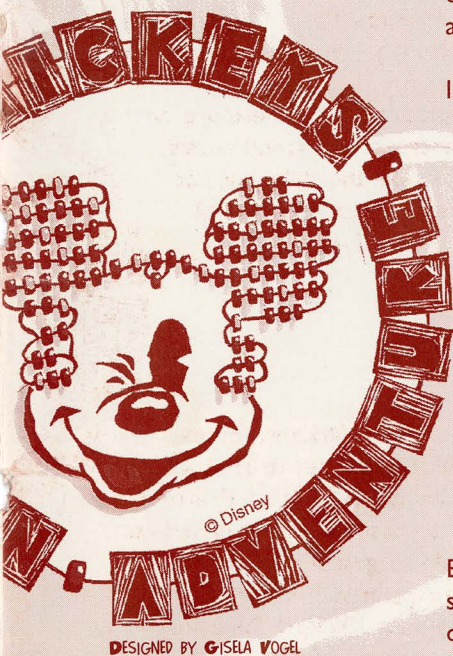
MICKEY'S AFRICAN ADVENTURE

A challenge to create 'an "All-African" Mickey ...by Africans, for exclusive use in an African context' (Moult 1995a:1) was put to final year information design students at the University of Pretoria recently. Their brief was to design a logo and various items that would suggest the idea of 'Mickey in an authentic African context' (Moult 1995a:1) for a themed conference for about 40 delegates from the European Walt Disney office, to be hosted by a game reserve in KwaZulu-Natal in July 1995. The purpose of the conference was to generate interest for the establishment of a permanent Disney presence in South Africa, which is at present represented only by a marketing licensee, **The Famous Name Company** (Moult 1995b). The conference was unfortunately cancelled, but a delegate



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AMERICAN



from France did visit South Africa and gave her impressions of the student work (Moult 1995b).

The design brief stipulated that the Disney style guidelines were to be adhered to strictly in order to comply with the demands of Disney corporate identity. This was obviously one of the most difficult constraints the students had to deal with since Disney insists on strict design and production parameters worldwide.

In order to stimulate the creativity and conceptual solutions of the students, the brief specified that the style of the project had to be 'African without being ethnic' and had to strive to reflect an authentic indigenous context (Moult 1995a:1). According to Moult (1995b), who formulated the brief, he placed a moratorium on ethnic patterns specifically to oblige the students to look beyond the easy clichéd solutions of Ndebele motifs, beadwork and African huts. Each student had to choose one cultural aspect as a central concept and had to develop the demands of the brief around that.

Every project had to incorporate the idea of surprise elements and adventure that would gradually unfold and keep the conference delegates interested. For most of the delegates this was to be their first visit to Africa, therefore the idea was to allow them to discover Africa and simultaneously to experience Mickey in a fresh context.

The students approached the brief with a diversity of conceptual solutions and showed that their perceptions of Africa included not only the heritage of the Bushmen, but also the products of acculturation, such as tin-ware and colonial hats. They chose central themes that lend themselves to both traditional and con-

temporary interpretations, such as games, masks and mythology, printmaking, music, grass and the sun. Although the majority of the students tried to be innovative, in most instances it is obvious that the sway of tradition and convention has informed their choice of visual material and images, for example in the still prevalent use of beadwork, feathers, Bushman artifacts and ostrich eggs.

In keeping with the mythical assumption that Africa operates closer to the natural sphere, most students chose natural materials and earthy colours, hand-made papers and wood-cuts to create an authentic hand-made look. This is an interesting contrast with American Mickey who, especially under the influence of Pop Art, has been characterised by bright primary colours and a hard-edge slick appearance.

Although the students were allowed to use computer technology, many opted for the combination of computer and hand-work in attempting to simulate the hand-made, rural African appearance mentioned above. They chose bold, geometric, stylized prints and typography that suggest earthiness, and avoided highly refined effects that have come to be associated with sophisticated contexts.

The main demands of this project, namely that it convey the sense of adventure and discovery, clearly relate to those notions that have traditionally been associated with Africa. The prevalent tourist marketing of Africa is indeed primarily based on the promise of exploration, adventure, mystery and magic, which coincides with people's desires for play, escapism and fantasy. Disney has long been identified with an 'American vision of paradise' (Landsberg

1995:7), and in the minds of many it is logical to link this to the conventional idealised perception of Africa.



The completed project was judged by both professional designers and representatives from Disney in South Africa, and was enthusiastically received by the Disney representative from France (Moult 1995b). The judges felt that the most successful solutions were those that showed visual continuity throughout the range of items called for in the brief. They furthermore felt that, within the



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confines of Disney guidelines, the idea of an African Mickey had been presented as a credible possibility. It is clear that most of the students succeeded in creating a lighthearted Disney atmosphere, as called for.

The challenge for contemporary artists and designers in South Africa is either to subvert or adapt European stereotypes as they think anew in their pursuit of a more representative African identity. It is not easy to move away from stereotypes precisely because they provide a useful frame of reference. Stereotypes reveal a specific mindset that is held in common by both creator and receiver, and once an image moves away from the recognisable stereotype, it is in danger of losing its primary communication function. In this kind of brief it is therefore probably not possible to strive for a totally non-stereotypical African identity, as that would defeat the purpose of tapping into people's subliminal perceptions.

Although the range of solutions for the project varied in conceptual ingenuity and originality, the merit of this type of project is that it compels us to try and re-evaluate our notions concerning African, and in particular, South African visual identity. It is clear that an 'African' atmosphere or identity is not necessarily merely a stylistic notion, but that it must become a search for the 'hidden transcript' referred to previously: a search that can only be successful if it engages conceptually with the richer meanings, experiences and connotations inherent to the African context.



DESIGNED BY WENDY BALL

DESIGNED BY FRANÇOIS ENGELBRECHT



DESIGNED BY MARTIN ERASMUS



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