

## Report

### **Design beyond the West: Interwoven Futures**

Research Center for Material Culture, Steenstraat 1, Leiden

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**Participants: Helen Anderson, Ali Clark, Cheick Diallo, Brecht Duijf, Clara Guasch, Wouter Halfwerk, Lenneke Langenhuijsen, Annette Schmidt and Wonu Veys.**

*Respond to the past and design for the future*

How can our museum collection position itself in the design field? To what extent are ethnological collections relevant to contemporary designers? How can a focus on the materiality of objects and the exchange of knowledge lead to new applications in design practices? What materials, techniques and applications are relevant to the field of contemporary sustainable design? What conceptions of design exist outside of traditional Western definitions?

These were some of the many questions that were addressed by the interdisciplinary workshop **Design beyond the West: Interwoven Futures**, that took place at the Research Center for Material Culture (RCMC) of the National Museum of World Cultures (NMvW) on the 16th of March 2017. Researchers, curators, designers, and students from design academies were invited to think with the curators at the NMvW to generate a new agenda for design. The idea has been conceived by Annette Schmidt (Curator Africa), Liza Swaving (RCMC), Wonu Veys (Curator Oceania) and Brecht Duijf & Lenneke Langenhuijsen from BuroBélen.

#### **Introduction by Dr. Annette Schmidt:**

The aim of the workshop was to explore how woven objects held in ethnographic museum collections can inspire creativity and new ideas for contemporary designers. The NMvW would like to encourage a greater understanding of and appreciation for crafts and designs from different times and parts of the world. By looking through designers' eyes the museum hopes to find new insights into the material wealth the collection embodies, and to engage with and attract new audiences. The workshop is tied to a broader research agenda around global design, in which we try to imagine and write a design history beyond the West.

The definition (which is still in flux) of a designer, according to the NMvW is: Designers create material solutions for individual and social problems, and they respond to human desires and needs. NMvW houses a collection of materialised desires and needs from all over the world. The NMvW collection reflects a wide variety of skills, technology and human creativity, and is very diverse: from boats to buildings, baskets, fishing nets, chairs etc. The study of our ethnological collections and their contexts can yield unexpected inspiration for contemporary manufacturing industries. As the field of design is immense, the focus of this workshop was on independent interwoven structures of natural fibres. We thus addressed one of the oldest techniques still extant, which are moreover used all over the world. Weaving or plating are not gender specific, the material resources are huge and the object outcomes endless: from boots to buildings, from baskets to armour and from fishing nets to chairs. All of these applications come together in our museum collection. The objects have very diverse characteristics: they can be hard or soft, their forms straight or organic,

their decoration simple or very complex, and their structures open or closed. This offers a grand range of possibilities and opportunities. Although the technique may be seen as traditional, it holds potential for future innovations.

The workshop focused on (historical) materiality, skill, craft, ethics and the social life of materials and objects in our collection. Bringing together people from different disciplinary backgrounds around objects made with a variety of weaving and plating techniques, the museum fosters the sharing of knowledge which might ultimately inspire new, innovative applications.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oe\\_mhMeqpYM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oe_mhMeqpYM) (Here you can watch a video about basket maker Mary Jackson. The video shows a lot about the way museums approach interwoven structures, the social context of objects, which includes the themes from the workshop.)



You can find woven objects, like baskets, in your own home. The material is cheap and very diverse. It maybe is one of the oldest, traditions still existing. The technique is used all over the world. There is the practical use of the basket, but also the economic value, the social structure in which it is made, and the link to the identity of the people who make them. All of the woven objects are unique, as they are made by individuals with different styles: you can recognise their styles through the different pieces. The outcome of variation is endless.

#### **Dr. Ali Clark (Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge)**

Dr. Ali Clark addressed the next three questions during her talk, which are linked to the workshop, by using a recent project on coconut fibre armour from Kiribati.

1. To what extent are ethnological collections relevant for contemporary designers?
2. How can woven objects held in ethnographic museum collections inspire creativity and new ideas for contemporary designers?
3. How can a focus on the materiality of objects and the exchange of knowledge lead to new applications in design practices?

The Kiribati armour is comprised of woven coconut fibres overalls (undergarment suit), woven coconut fibre sleeves (which is a separated piece, worn on top of these overalls), and over this the coconut fibre cuirass is worn. The cuirass has a high back plate and is usually decorated with human hair, but it could also be decorated with shell, plant fibres or feathers. It is worn with a porcupine fish skin helmet. Other aspects to the outfits include woven coconut fibres handcoverings with sharks teeth, and belts made either of ray skin or woven coconut fibre. Each outfit is slightly different and would have been worn in conflict either between individuals or groups of people. The rapid decline in production of this type of armour is generally attributed to the influence of both missionaries on the

islands and the arrival of the British in 1892. With no need for the armour anymore, they were offered to tourists, government officials, explorers, and other visitors. This is the reason that so many are found in museums across the world.

To what extent are ethnological collections relevant for contemporary designers? To answer this question the focus is specifically on Kiribati's designers or practitioners. The image of the warrior has been used since the 1990s by designers: in clothing, as mascots, as a symbol of strength and pride. Some of these designers had visited the Kiribati Cultural Centre where the armour is exhibited. These designers took inspiration from the armour for their works of art. In this way ethnological collections are still relevant for contemporary designers.

In 2013 this suit of armour from the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge was selected for inclusion for the exhibition *Oceania* in 2018 at the Royal Academy. Alan Clark's 'Pacific Presences' research project took this as an opportunity to explore these objects further. This suit of armour is currently on display in the exhibition *The Island Warrior* at the Museum of Cambridge, held from the 4th of April until the 25th of September 2017. The suit of armour needed conservation before they could exhibit it, so the conservator started to think about the way of conserving and repairing the woven armour. Weavers and artists were commissioned to produce a new suit of armour for the exhibition, and the scope of the exhibition became more focused on ways of seeing of Kiribati armour. The newly produced armour was not made out of the original coconut fibre. The theme of the exhibition became 'Conservation'. The Kiribati armour project has highlighted the importance of collaborative, interdisciplinary, object-based research for museum collections.



The original Kiribati Armour



Artists producing the armour



The final armour

### **Cheick Diallo, Mali/France (Diallo Design)**

Cheick Diallo is an architect and designer. He was born in Mali, and trained in Paris. Diallo designs objects and furniture which challenge the common perceptions of African design with their mix of ancient wisdom and contemporary sensibility. He creates objects with recycled products and with fibres: there is a wide range of possibilities of creation with fibre. One of his first creations was a shovel which had been turned upside down, to function as a chair.

Diallo gets his inspiration from the streets: he looks at the streets as if they are showrooms. One example is the city Bamako in Mali. He has seen lots of recycled products in the streets of Bamako, and people who worked with these recycled materials in the streets: at one place he saw more than 300 craftsmen working with recycled metal to produce domestic metal objects, and he was really inspired by this. Lots of people sell things on the streets in Africa, and Diallo also got inspiration from salesmen who tie their commodities together in all kinds of different shapes. One day he saw a man who made ovens from recycled metal. This man wove the recycled metal in such a shape that he was

able to create ovens with this construction. This example functioned as a source of inspiration for Diallo, for creating objects with recycled materials as well as weaving objects with fibre. He started to design different kinds of objects with recycled materials: from waste to product. Diallo: “We work with what we find, with wasted materials, and with the environment, in order to avoid producing new materials.”

Over the past decade, the work of Diallo was exhibited in different international museums and international biennials. His work is also in the permanent collections of museums, like Museum Mandet (France), Musée Dapper Foundation (Paris, France), the National Centre for Art and Culture Georges Pompidou (Paris, France), Manchester Museum of Art (Manchester UK), the Brooklyn Museum (USA) and Museum Grand Hornu (Belgium). Diallo has opened his design studio in Bamako from which he developed a unique practice as a designer, manufacturer, producer, and consultant for design projects involving processes based in Africa. Diallo’s design is quite affordable as he also sells objects to middle-class young people.



Inspiration from salesmen



From waste to design



Woven chair by Diallo Design

### **Clara Guasch (Material & Innovation Leader for Textiles, IKEA of Sweden)**

Clara Guasch has a different angle on the topic of this workshop than the previous speakers: she works as a material and innovation leader for textiles at IKEA, an international company which develops new materials and products. She starts her talk with textiles: “Textile is a way of thinking, and has fulfilled many functions”. Some examples whereby textile has fulfilled many functions are the parachute and the raincoat. Northern African nomads use textiles as a smart, portable, healthy and cozy home: their home consists of textile, in the form of a tent. But textile can also function as an art object. Textiles mean a lot for the human culture.

It is a challenge to develop materials, which are sustainable and fulfill our everyday needs. Especially for the manufacturing process of textiles, where the oil industry dominates. IKEA wants to change that process to one where everything is based on the sun: a sun-based economy with ‘sun-based materials’. Cellulose sources have greatest potential. Cellulose is one of many polymers found in nature. Wood, paper, and cotton all contain cellulose. Cellulose is an excellent fiber. Wood, cotton, and hemp rope are all made of fibrous cellulose.

Another material, which IKEA wants to use more often in the future are bast fibres: which come from a group of plants like flax (linen) and hemp that have huge potential. They can be used in their entirety – minimizing waste – and the materials can be transformed with less energy and resources, and at the right price. But also growing hemp as a rotation crop is one of the best ways to preserve

biodiversity and the soil, health and material availability in the future. Because it cleans and restores nutrients to the soil, the next rotating crop is going to have much better output. This is an important aspect for IKEA, because they do not want to deplete the soil and the resources. If they want to move to a sun-based economy, this is something to think of: keeping the balance between the material and farming. Bast fibres provide these kind of balance. Cotton is not a bad material according to Guasch, but bast fibres are even better: they have more environmental benefits. Silk is also a great material to work with, as well as bamboo, banana leaves, pineapple leaves, and even water hyacinth. So there are still a couple of sustainable materials to work with to fulfill our everyday needs.

### **Dr. Wouter Halfwerk (Vrije Universiteit)**

Wouter Halfwerk is a biologist from the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. He is working on evolutionary questions of bird species. During his talk he gave a biological perspective on nest building in the relation to weaving techniques: he talked about bird nests. There is an amazing variety of birds nests: his main question during this talk was “How and why do birds builds nests?”

There are different types of nests: from simple to complex building constructions. Nests could be built on the ground, in holes and, in trees. There are cupped nests, and doomed nests which are quite complex. The materials which birds use to make their nests are also variable: from branches to feathers and stones. The most ancient birds laid their eggs on the ground and let the sun incubate them. From that point on all sorts of ways to protect the eggs have evolved: the main goal of a nest is to protect the eggs. You can divide birds into two groups: those that have chicks that leave as soon as they hatch, and those chicks that stay longer in their nests, sometimes for days, weeks or even for months. These nests have a much more complicated function: they provide shelter, isolation and should be hygienic.

There are different ways of building nests: there are the masons (that build from mud), there are the stackers (that put branches together), and there are the more specialised builders: the stitchers, the birds that stitch plant materials and even spiderwebs together. In these cases it is the female that builds the nest and takes care of the chicks. There are also the weaver birds: they use an elaborate technique to build their nest. In this case it is the male bird that is the builder of the nest, and it is the female bird who decides where to lay her eggs. This is an evolutionary shift in nest building: from ancient female birds that builds their nest to provide safety and shelter, to the male weaver birds that build nests to impress the female birds.



Bird's nest



Weaver bird's nest

### **Dr. Helen Anderson (British Museum)**

Helen Anderson has worked on the basketry project ‘Beyond the Basket’ at the University of East Anglia, Norwich. The aim of the project was to explore the role of basketry in human culture. Anderson was especially interested in how far back we might be able to detect weaving processes in the archaeological record, and what that might mean for understanding human cognition.

Archaeological evidence from weaving dates back to about 22.000 years ago from the sea of Galilee in Israel. The evidence consists of plant fibres to make strings, cords and baskets. Weaving also may have its origin in the Venus figurines: which includes several types of headgear, at least one type of skirt, and possibly woven hair with weaving structures. But weaving evidence from the Gravettian period has also been found in the form of bracelets with weaving patterns. Another important example is the incised ostrich eggshell from Patna, Maharashtra, India. The archaeologist S.A. Sali explored the trellis pattern of the incised ostrich eggshell: "...It is not unlikely that trellis pattern may make one think about the art of weaving, however crude it might look. The beads recovered from the levels of this culture at Patna further substantiate this view. Because they have to be put in a thread and preparation of thread is the first stage of weaving." (Sali, 1989:101)

The moment humans moved to coastal environments, they started to catch fish: in order to catch them they started to use nets, but they also used nets in order to transport them back to their caves.


What are the cognitive abilities which are necessary to make these independent interwoven structures? Weaving and basketry are related to geometry and language. In order to be able to weave we use the frontal lobe area of the brain. This part is involved with mental processes such as thinking, decision-making, and planning. When you use this part of the brain, you think rather than see: so weaving is thinking instead of weaving. "Weaving isn't by hands, but by thinking".



**Functions of the Frontal Lobes**

Executive Functions:

- Planning ahead
  - ▶ Predicting the future
- Monitoring
  - ▶ Evaluating a situation
- Sustained Attention
  - ▶ Keeping eyes on target
- Goal Directed Behavior
- Working Memory
  - ▶ Short term memory + Rehearsal
- Problem Solving



Fragment of a bracelet from the Gravettian period    Functions of the Frontal Lobes

### **BuroBélen (Brecht Duijf & Lenneke Langenhuijsen)**

BuroBélen is a design studio based in Amsterdam. By broadening and expanding the material qualities of spaces, objects and products, BuroBélen creates tangible design for the future. During their work, they try to look at processes from different angles and different cultures: the aim is not only to learn from each other, but also to implement things in an equal way.

"Wooden Textiles" is a project BuroBélen has been working on since 2010, where they collaborate with craftsmen from the Pacific. The project is about tapa making, which is one of the first methods of making textiles. The basic material for "Wooden Textiles" is taken from the mulberry tree, the cambium. A tapa is a soft and flexible wooden cloth that Tongans use for rituals like weddings and funerals. The basis for the ancient craft of tapa-making is the inner bark of the paper mulberry tree. Original tapa have a fascinating beauty but lack the practical qualities needed for contemporary use. This project was professionalised in 2014 under the name of Cambials. The most important aspect for BuroBélen was their collaboration with the Tongan craftspeople. For the Tongan craftspeople the project is a way of exporting their product, and for BuroBélen it is creating a biodegradable material for the Western market.

According to BuroBélen the interwoven structure is a phenomenon which always involves human activity and fibre, and which creates a surface. Nowadays new and recycled fibres are used for interwoven structures. The techniques of fibres can be used in four different ways: direct use of

recognisable material, direct use of unrecognisable material, processed material use, and combinations. The textures can be soft and hard, rough and fine, or dense and open. The colours can be made out of natural materials or dyed natural materials.



Wooden Textiles from Buro Belén AT MX2016 4



Interwoven structure from palm leaves