

Crafting the design: Connecting the changing societies through local designs that impact on global markets.



Shorn J. Molokwane
University of Botswana
Botswana

Abstract

In the contemporary world of global mass consumption, the products and services are becoming increasingly similar and at the same time the human demands for the same have been evolving to more personal or emotional connection with the objects. The technological advances have offered their limited answer to this, and it seems going to the basics of art and craft ideals may offer other alternatives.

This paper explores the nature and practice of art and craft ideals as practised by local communities, study their socio-cultural and economic contexts, and explore their potentialities for application in contemporary design.

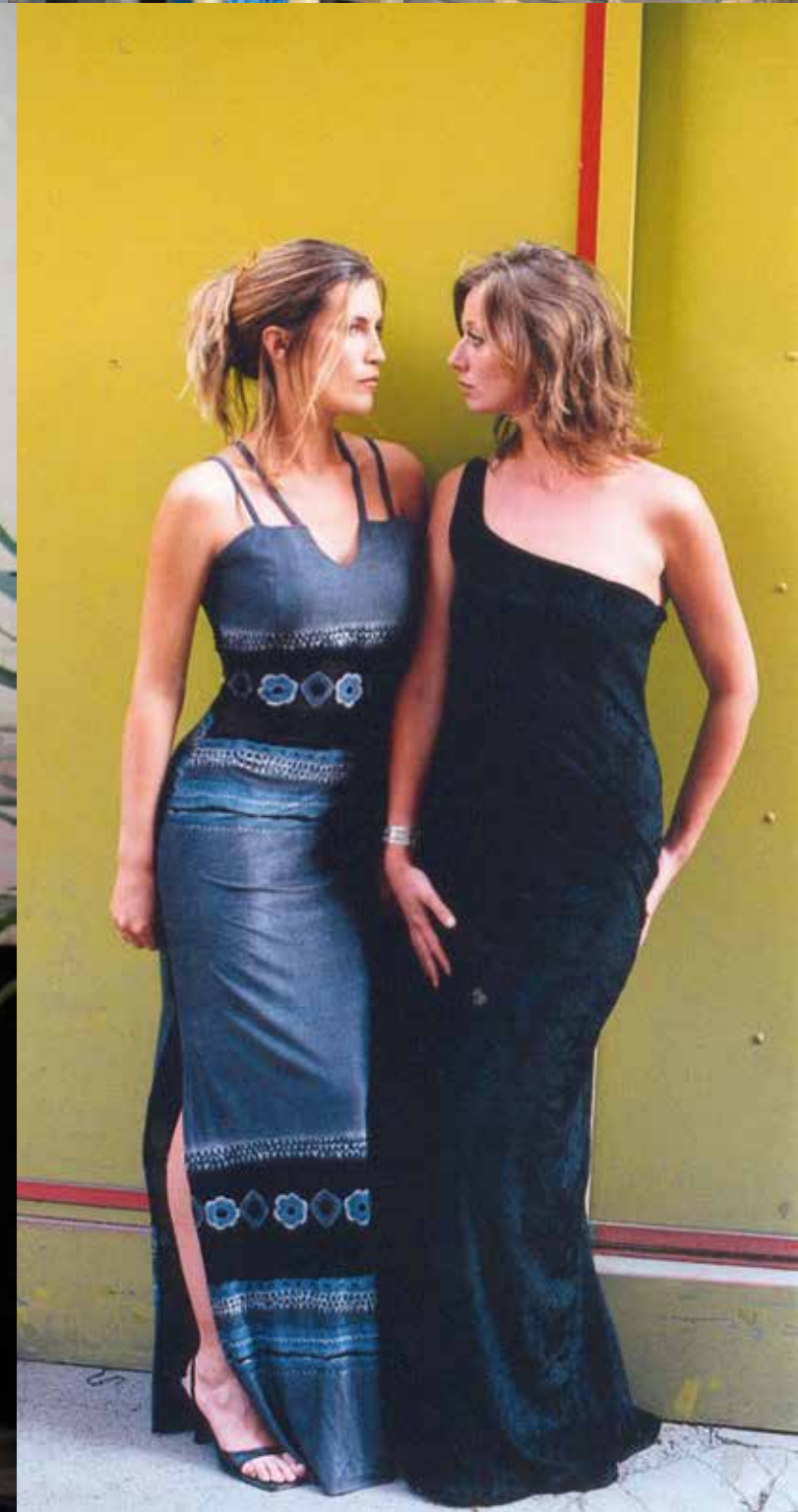
The decorative arts in Africa has been explored extensively and applied in variegated ways in the contemporary design and consumer world, the success of which would have benefitted from a deeper and truer interpretation of local contexts.

The Botswana arts and crafts scene has been largely unexplored and as such their inspirational potentialities in design remain untapped and at best a curious passing reference. Two iconic art and craft references in particular have been identified as typical to Botswana, and these are used and practiced by different communities, especially women, across the country.

The references studied are the Lekgapho design as found on the traditional houses and mural decorations and the basketry art deco. The arts and crafts references are then used to inspire innovate new forms, styles, and other influences into design practices such as textiles and fashion, as well as furniture products.

Keywords

Craft ideals, craftsmanship, basketry, art and craft, Botswana, economic diversification and entrepreneurship, fashion design



Introduction

The current trend in the global consumer market of designed goods require us to revisit how we enhance the product appreciation in the eye of the user, and create a worthwhile product experience, to break the monotony that has been created by mass consumption, as we look into mass customisation. The experiences in the arts and crafts movements and activities, as well as observation of the cultural dynamics, suggest that art and craft ideal may offer some insights into bringing design closer to the people.

The art and craft ideal has been practiced and studied for a long time in different cultural contexts across the world. Its references have been widely used in different design works to achieve a higher aesthetic concept in the modern product, with varying degrees of success. It is a commonly held view that the African arts and crafts need a better interpretative understanding of the practitioners for even better results in product manifestation. This is in reference to a deeper and truer knowledge of the socio-cultural construct and other informing factors of the arts and crafts, on the part of the investigators and design practitioners.

The arts and crafts scene in Botswana for example has largely been under-researched in the way that its ideals inform the aesthetic appreciation and use of the products, and possibilities of this informing modern product design. A study on crafts and the visual arts in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region argues that these have much to offer local and international markets, lamenting that "...the culture sector in most developing countries plays a much more limited role – as a source of jobs, revenues and foreign exchange – than in industrialized countries where it contributes to a significant proportion of gross national product, indicating the need to promote what might be called "cultural entrepreneurship" among developing country artists." ILO SEED WORKING PAPER No. 51, 2003 p. iii. It further

observes that limited data exist and the true scale and dimension of local cultural activities are generally not well documented. In particular, studies on creativity and innovation that anchor on cultural references and creative industries are very limited.

The lekgapho design as depicted in the mural decoration of traditional houses and the basketry art that has become iconic to Botswana, as they define the continuing cultural history from the early peoples of Botswana, are two of the most important referential arts and crafts practices that have immense design significance and value on so many levels.

It is the aim of this paper to explore, through the above arts and crafts practices, learn through them the creativity ideals that may be re-aligned and applied to contemporary design, creating a higher aesthetic and improved market appreciation in products, therefore contributing to economic diversification, entrepreneurship and a higher quality of life. Design-craft collaboration is an should be approached as a multidisciplinary activity, through which designers and craftspeople alike exchange skills and knowledge, thus enriching their knowledge (Dykes, Rodgers, & Smyth, 2009) for the greater benefit of the society.

The paper significantly aims to maximize local potentialities to impact on global markets, through infusion of indigenous knowledge and resources into globally marketable products.

Research Context

The basis for the research is that present-day product appreciation is based on more than just functions and increasingly on anthropological, socio-cultural and psychoanalytical aspects of the human being in the way that they inter-act with the said products.

This is a reference knowledge creation research in new product design and development. It contributes to product value addition through tapping on cultural and indigenous knowledge

base. Tung (2012, p 73) quotes an UNESCO report that “The ability of designers to elucidate modern technologies for local artisans can create many potential opportunities. Designers can galvanize local artisans to exploit local production techniques through collaboration, and thus and thus enable them to cope with the processes and consequences of industrialisation” (UNESCO 2005, p.11). Santagata (2002) suggests that developing products based on cultural references and local resources may greatly enhance local economic development. Using the cultural and art&craft references, unique and globally sought products with a niche market may be developed, where this products stand out in increasingly converging markets (Lin 2007, Moalosi, Popovic, & Hickling-Hudson 2007). Such products usually create their own identity and would do well in the global market (Dillon 2008). This will lead to increased innovation in the industry, with subsequent increases in the market appreciation and economic growth and diversification.

The creative industries across the world form part of the many governments’ strategies and policies on economic diversification and entrepreneurship, more significantly in the developing economies.

People have long been studied to have an attraction to the products that “seem to have been made just for them”, that is, products with some “soul” (Norman, 1988). This trait can be identified well in craft-based design (exemplified by the arts and craft movements, bahaus, e.t.c.). So craft design has become to be known as the antidote to the alien and monotonous state that modern product design is. The African aesthetic is studied through the Botswana case examples, in the way manifests itself well is through the handcrafts and the arts. In the first place is the elaboration of the objects. There are several stages involved (Molokwane, 2007): Usually the workers would be talented artisans that have learned and perfected the skills over long periods of time, typically passed on from one generation to the next. There is a

strong sense of pride in the skills of the creator, and the users have a special relationship with artisan. In some cases, it is not uncommon for a master craftsman to be accorded a special place in the hierarchy of the social leadership, because he is intricately involved in shaping the life of the people amongst whom he lives, through the objects he creates for them. Well, the process of the object creation starts with the all-important need of the clients and provision of services for their everyday needs.

The raw materials are then sourced from the nature, using extraction and consequential processing methods that cause minimum disturbance to the ecosystem. The development process can be followed, should the user wish to see, as the craftsman is usually working from the same communal setting. The said product or object will necessarily incorporate the cultural context of the user, as the craftsman is well vested in such knowledge, and recognises the importance of the object speaking the user’s language. The language may well be reflected in the shaping of the object, in the colourings, in the texture, in the decoration, or even in its smell. Other similar factors such as size, weight e.t.c. also reflect the meaning the product conveys and are essentially the design elements that a designer or craftsman would typically consider in the product development. Different combination of these would result in a variety of objects, which would consequently be received with various reactions, according to the context of application and the user’s circumstances.

In most of object design and decoration, semiotics plays a very important part. The symbols and signs impregnated into the different design elements give rise to a host of interesting interpretations, understanding and aesthetic appreciation of the objects (Krippendorff, 2006). Craftsman encodes different interpretations of the peoples lives, their cultures, myths and beliefs e.t.c. into the colours, shapes, textures and so forth. We will briefly look at examples of such designs, in baskets, housing and apparel design.

Another way in which we try to understand the arts and crafts products in the way they inter-act with people is to first, understand the concept of human culture, and relate this to design. In our study of culture we take a closer look at the material possessions of the people, as they have a strong influence on civilization. It is perhaps worth noting that culture comes from the Latin word for “cultivating” or working the soil. So in this context, culture is about taking care of things (goods). What we are saying is that material possessions (and this need not mean physical objects only) and their use by the people, define the people’s culture. There is of course a considerable overlapping and interdependence between the ideals and materials of cultures.

Culture is also be studied by looking at some general definitions: Anthropologists at the beginning of the century defined culture from a human angle -as a way of life of a people, or what a person needed to know to survive in a society. This approach essentially describes peoples’ characteristics, leading to a simplistic conclusion that culture is what is distinctive about people. Formed here is a notion of ideals (ideas and knowledge) of common focus that may bring certain individuals together and lead to formation of clubs and societies, for example. We can delve deeper to understand the distinction between “elite” (or high) and “mass” (or popular) culture. We find “manners”, “refinement”, and “social graces” - some of the keywords used to signify culture, especially high culture. The interpretation of culture is very much a subjective quality phenomenon - “what makes good taste” depends on who is asking. The mass culture of popular classes, suggests tastes of a whole unionized groups, rather than the preferences of single members in the group. This popular culture is quite important in understanding our societies today which consume, on a mass basis, mass produced, mass distributed and mass media-based, goods and services. So the dynamics of societies today are influenced to a large extent by the thoughts, decisions and actions of interest groups, rather than of individuals.

The basketry craft

The woven basket from the north-western region of Botswana is an iconic and referential cultural product whose sales have been growing well in the tourist markets. African artists place a high value on fine workmanship and mastery of the medium (of material and of construction). Because the baskets are hand-crafted, they are usually given detailed personal attention that ensures quality construction and finish.

In the design of baskets for example, there are two main considerations: the utilitarian nature of the object, as well as the decorative. Originally used for containing foodstuffs or other household items like crockery, laundry, baskets were usually designed in a typically bowl and bucket format, being semi-spherical or semi-spheroidal. Such forms were chosen for their practicality in containment, the easiness of shaping the object and the harmonious effect that the curvaceous detail gives to the finished object. In the last few decades however, baskets have increasingly become works of art, and are generally used as display pieces for decorative purposes, owing to the evolvement of their shape design details.

The colours and shape design details differ widely, depending on the cultural setting, the local material resources, the knowledge, exposure and experience of the artists, as well as the market. Various patterns and colours are used for example, in the Zulu tradition, they may be used in the marriage ceremonies, as presents. A triangle shape on a basket signifies femininity and may express a wish for the young bride to have daughters, in a similar way that rectangular shapes represent masculinity. Other shapes and colours would represent health, protection, rain, e.t.c. and possession of such an item is hoped to bring about the corresponding effects. There is obviously a lot of mythology and believe system related to the designs and the possible effect they may have, the operative being faith and conviction in all the process. The designs are sometimes very personalised, i.e. the customer may specify

particular shapes and colours according to their tastes and preferences.

There are a lot of cultural and traditional connotations built into the baskets and the art of basket making. The basket weavers, traditionally women and young girls, come from remote rural villages, where they learn the craft over many years, usually passed on through generations from their parents or an older crafts person. The people in these villages have an akin relation to nature, and their lifestyles are guided by myths, beliefs and norms rooted in oral traditions. Through their basketry, the village people are reviving Botswana's culture and ensuring its continuity.

The baskets are woven with story lines that reflect the oral tradition of story telling, myths and beliefs, as well as the people's understanding and interpretation of nature.

The patterns generated interpret shapes and forms found on or made mostly by animals, as well as other creations made by the people themselves. Examples such as Ribs of a Giraffe, Knees of a Tortoise, Running Ostrich, Flight of a Swallow, Forehead of a Zebra, Urine trail of a Bull, make for some interesting and innovative geometry. These, like the names suggest, generally depict the said feature or activity of the animal or object. Figure 1 shows some standard geometric patterns for some of the basket interpretations.



Figure 1. Typical basketry geometry patterns
Source: BotswanaCraft Marketing

It can be seen that it should be possible to produce an endless number of shapes and forms based on the people's traditions and beliefs, and the implications for design and vice versa are immense. The current research by the author aims to document in detail all the currently used shapes and patterns, with their variegated interpretations and story lines. Table 1 below depicts the typical baskets produced by the women's groups in and around the Okavango region of Botswana. The patterns offer a wealth of design inspiration resource to be re-interpreted in many varying contexts of design products, and this paper merely shows a very small preview of these possibilities.

In the development of design products for local as well as global consumption, the designer has to take into cognisance issues of product meaning, product identity, localisation or delocalisation of design concepts, and emotional factors of user-object interaction. The designs depicted in through figures 3 to 7 below embody these ideas.



Mural Decorations

A well developed artistic design occupation is the decoration of traditional houses, especially in some villages of Southern Africa. The houses are decorated by women, using the earth and vegetative extracts. The houses themselves are hand built, or generally moulded, using strengthened soils and other local materials like logs from trees and grass.

The most vibrant and surviving art form in the house decoration is the lekgapho design, which is the mural or floor decoration, a patterning technique made normally by fingers, typically using a mixture of cow dung and soil oxides. There is an infinite variations of designs that may be generated in this way. Some general forms created, such as straight forms, curvaceous, wiggly or zigzag, even horseshoe, the techniques varying in elaboration, and usually the most showy of the designs may be found during festive occasions like weddings, whilst for funerals, a sombre design would be made. Besides the decorative patterning, the walls and floors are themselves moulded into reliefs, and sometimes also given specific textures. The reliefs are made in different forms, from animal forms and geometric. This is usually done in mono colour, as the emphasis is now on the shape, but occasionally other colours made be employed.

Figure 2 Mural decoration of a traditional house in Lekgapho style Grant, S, & Grant E. (1995). Decorated Homes in Botswana. Phuthadikobo Museum.



The following figures (figures 3 to 7), show an attempts at interpreting the local art and craft influences, using the basketry crafts and decorated home art as examples, to create contemporary design pieces for global consumption.

We took inspiration from the African culture of mural decoration, traditional handcraft to create clothing pieces that address the issues of more than just being dresses to be worn and cover the body. In what one could call a Conversation with art, craft and nature, we explore cultural references and aesthetics in the craft world and attempts at interpretation of cross cultural appreciation in the design world.

Figure 3 Basketry inspired designs.





Decorated home
Source: Grant S&E. Decorated Homes in Botswana, Phuthadikobo Museum (1995)

The mural decoration of traditional houses as shown above subtly integrated into modern clothing shown here on the left and below.

Designs by Shorn Molokwane



Figure 4 Mural Decorations inspired designs

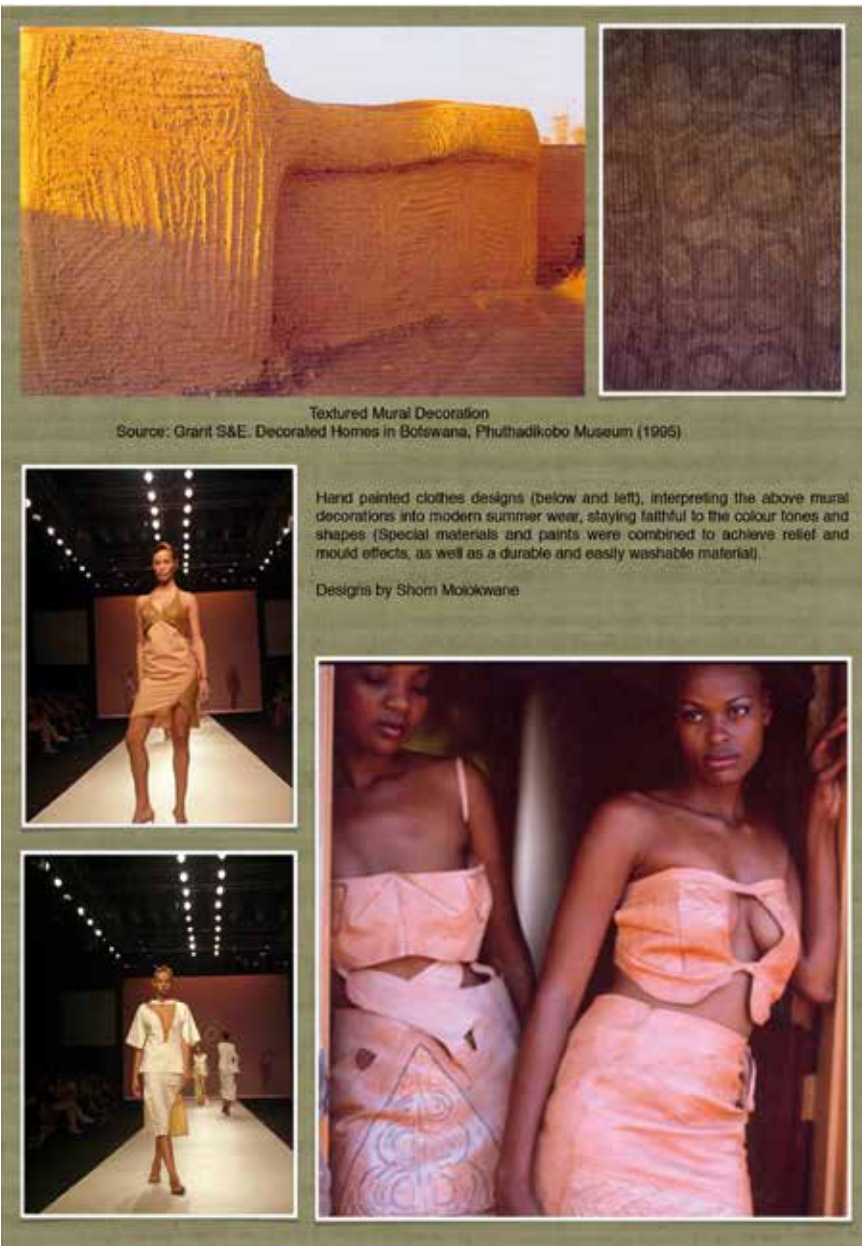


Figure 5 More Mural decorations inspired designs



The chair design above is based on a local insect look, and finished with a style typical of Botswana traditional mural decoration lekgapo style. Similarly the settee below uses the rich colourings from local soils and patterns taken from traditional textiles.

27



Discussion

Through the above objects, we try to create a relationship, or association between the sources of inspiration used, they may be people, objects or environments, through the creators, with their materials and processes, and the users, in their variegated profiles.

Effectively, the designer creates meaning through the design, which is product meaning, and the user will have their own interpretative meaning that allows them to have a meaningful association with the product. Meaning provides an essential foundation upon which arousal and emotion are constructed (Chapman, 2005). Products are no longer seen only as functional objects; now they are seen for what they symbolise: their meaning, association and involvement in building a user's self-image. They should not only have form and function, but also have "content" that is meaningful for the users (Manzini and Susani, 1995). By the use of or interaction with the design products, it is possible to create a particular identity for the people related to the objects, and as such they will be identified by association. Peter and Charlotte Fiell [2001] conducted an interview in 2000 with hundreds of the world's leading designers, to get their thinking on the direction of design ...in the 21st century. Herewith are some excerpts of views of some of them.

Sebastian Bergne, a designer based in UK/ Italy, declared,

"I am happy with a design when it makes people smile" [Fiell&Fiell 2001, p68]. He continues: "There are different ways that an object can make someone smile: familiarity, surprise, beauty, satisfaction, pride simplicity, humour or wonder. If an object can stimulate this reaction whilst performing the function it was created for, then it is well-designed. It has in some way improved our lives. Design is the process by which these objects are created; it is not the object itself." [Fiell&Fiell 2001, p71]

Riccardo Blumer, Italy,

"As far as I am concerned (I do not know about the future), design is what joins our senses to the soul, thereby providing the only union that produces happiness". [Fiell&Fiell 2001, p80]

Benjamin Hopf and Constantin Wortmann, Büro für form, Germany,

"Products need more than perfect function and ergonomics, they need some poetry". [Fiell&Fiell 2001, p104]

Elephant Design, Japan,

"Designing free of constraints of mass production" . [Fiell&Fiell 2001, p154]

Jean-Marc Gady, France,

"I try to break the usual codes in order to pursue new emotions". [Fiell&Fiell 2001, p166]

Stefano Giovannoni, Italy,

"Moving to an emotional supermarket". [Fiell&Fiell 2001, p172]

The designer of jaguar Helfet Design, UK, Keith Helfet,

"As a designer, there can be no greater prize, for me, than to create an object of desire". [Fiell&Fiell 2001, p192]

Matthew Hilton, UK,

"The future of design is seduction". [Fiell&Fiell 2001, p196]

Isao Hosoe, Italy,

"Designing behaviour, not objects". [Fiell&Fiell 2001, p206]

IXI, Japan,

"We believe that the combination of several strong individualities with a strong social sense gives the best results". [Fiell&Fiell 2001, p234]

Kazuo Kawasaki, International design Centre Nagoya,

"Design must balance ethics and aesthetics for the good of society". [Fiell&Fiell 2001, p250]

Tom Kirk, UK,

"Inquisitive and practical, combining traditional techniques with technology and a unique aesthetic". [Fiell&Fiell 2001, p258]

Roberto Lazzeroni, Italy,

"i seek 'sentimental' design that exists somewhere between the past and the future". [Fiell&Fiell 2001, p278]

Piero Lissoni, Italy,

"There's something I hate in the world of design: the excess of protagonism, which can

make designed objects so difficult to live with". [Fiell&Fiell 2001, p290]

Alberto Meda, Italy,

"The attempt to achieve simple things meets what you might call 'biological' need for simplicity. Since we are complicated beings, let us at least be surrounded by simple objects". [Fiell&Fiell 2001, p334]

Roberto Pezzetta, Italy,

"A good designer has to be part artist, part engineer, psychologist, sociologist, planner, marketing man and communicator: part everything, and part nothing!". [Fiell&Fiell 2001, p382]

Christophe Pillet, France,

"Design must offer people an alternative way of living - it must answer the aspirations in terms of well being and happiness". [Fiell&Fiell 2001, p386]

Ingegerd Raman, Sweden,

"My work is always a link between simplicity, function and aesthetic values". [Fiell&Fiell 2001, p398]

It may be deduced from most of the views of the designers interviewed that design of today and the future is more than just about functionality of the object, it is about capturing and reflecting the complexities and the demands of a life of the contemporary person. We reflect more on the life of the person as that which entails passion and a desire to relate to and communicate interesting aspects of life. There are a number of approaches that have been used to answer demands for improved product appreciation and the arts and crafts ideals contribute well to that.

The current trend in consumerism is towards uniquely crafted products as opposed to mass produced goods, where the cultural references are more prevalent. (Krippendorff 2006)

There has been an increasing positive alliance between crafts and technology, to the benefit of practitioners (Harris, 2012, Yair & Schwarz,

2011). Collaborations between designers and craftspeople have opened up new dialogues in so many directions across cultures, borders, economic divides, often bridging language boundaries with the empathies of visuals, textures, story lines, colours and materials. The resultant work (in terms of products and services) is then of a higher socio-economic, ecological, technological and aesthetic value to all concerned: practitioners, consumers and countries.

References

Algotsson, S. and Davies, D. (1996). *The Spirit of African Design*. New York, Clarkson N. Potter.

Botswana Government. (2002) *National Policy on Culture*. Botswana Government Printer, Gaborone

Chapman, J. (2005). *Emotionally Durable Design: Objects, Experiences and Empathy*. London: Earthscan.

Dillon, P. (2008). Creativity, wisdom and trusteeship- Niches of cultural production. In A. Craft, H. Gardner, & G. Claxton (Eds.), *Creativity and wisdom in education* (pp. 105-118). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Dodgson, M., Gann, D., & Salter, A. (2005). *Think, play, do: Technology, innovation, and organization*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Dykes, T., Rodgers, P., & Smyth, M. (2009). Towards a new disciplinary framework for contemporary design practice. *CoDesign*, 5(2), 99-116.

Fiell, C. and P. (eds.), *Designing the 21st Century*. Taschen. Bonn, 2001.

Gillon, W: (1991). *A short story of African Art*. Penguin Books Ltd. Middlesex.