

# **Russel Wright's Asian Papers and Japanese Post-War Design**

## **Abstract**

Russel Wright is an American designer who promoted the 'American Modern' design and the Good Design movement during the 1930s-1950s. While he is well known in the western design context, his role in promoting the idea of 'Asian modern' to Asian countries in the post-war period has been little known and studied. Wright gave the Japanese government a document entitled 'Advice on the Promotion of Quality Handicraft of Japan' in 1956, and he was invited to Japan to advise on the selection and modification of handicrafts for export to the USA. In this paper, I would like to investigate the nature and consequence of Wright's advice to the Japanese government and its relation to the 'Good Design' movements in the West. I will also discuss its significance to the continuous discourse of 'Japaneseness' and the modernisation of 'tradition' in the Japanese design historical context. This discussion will further explore the relation between culture and product design, in particular, the way how the Japanese culture intervened the Modernist idea of 'good design'.

## **Introduction**

Russel Wright (1904-76) was arguably the most influential American designer and lifestyle guru for the modern American homes, – perhaps the equivalent of the contemporary Martha Stewart. Helped by his wife's talent for business management, he promoted the American-Way lifestyle which rediscovered and raised national pride in American tradition, he created a series of 'American Modern' designs inspired by American tradition and International style that was suited to modern American lifestyle, and increased domestic consumption of these 'American Modern' household products among the American middle-class during the 1930s-40s. This created a commercially oriented nation-wide design movement which developed into the official Good Design movement in the 1950s. While he is well known in the American design context, his role in promoting the idea of 'Asian modern' to Asian countries in the post-war period as part of the American government's foreign aid programme has been little known and studied. In this paper, I would like to investigate the nature of Wright's project in Asia with particular focus on Japan. I would also like to explore the cross-cultural relations between national design movements and the 'Good Design' movements both in the USA and Japan.

## **Politico-cultural Context of the International Cooperation**

### **Administration (ICA) Project**

As part of a US Foreign Aid program totalling \$3.3 billion, the US government allocated the International Cooperation Administration (ICA), a State Department unit, \$600,000 to study and aid native handicrafts in developing countries on a project which started in June 1955. This post-war period was marked by the USA's Cold War confrontations: the Korean War (1950-53), the Vietnam War (1957-75) and Cuban missile crisis (1962). This ICA project therefore needs to be placed in the context of the American anti-communist ideological movement and the imperative to enhance its alternative politico-cultural sphere of influence in the world. It would propagate the American idea of modernism as the 'formal cultural expression of a nation that confidently assumed the moral and material leadership of the non-Communist "free world"'.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand this project is also motivated by a strong desire to offer humanitarian and economic aid through assisting modernisation

using indigenous method, such as building 'a sewage system with bamboo pipes, and sinks of native basketry, coated with native resin', rather than creating 'an unhappy piece-meal imitation' of the American way of living.<sup>2</sup>

An official of the ICA commissioned three American designers to travel to Asia for two and a half months from December 1955 to February 1956. Russel Wright and other designers visited Japan for a week in December prior to his tour to survey the situation of handcrafts in the Southeast Asia<sup>3</sup>. Their research trip had the objective of helping the countries of the Far East improve and expand the production of handcraft articles for their own domestic use and for export sale, in order to increase their foreign exchange earnings.<sup>4</sup> After the trip, an exhibition of 1500 quality handcrafts, mostly small items from Cambodia, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Thailand and Vietnam, was exhibited at the Coliseum, New York on 25-29 June, 1956, in an attempt to attract American traders and retailers.

### **Russel Wright's Proposal to Japan**

During this ICA project, Wright was interested in the way Japan had promoted traditional handicrafts for their own industry and export, and the way modern equipment such as American refrigerators had been redesigned to fit into their small houses and to satisfy their own needs.<sup>5</sup> Wright thought he could set Japan as a model for Southeast Asian development, because Japan had developed the best of modern mechanisation from the West but had also preserved medieval traditional skills to a greater extent than any other Asian country. However, he found many good Japanese traditional products which were not known to the American market, and therefore could be promoted.<sup>6</sup> Wright submitted a recommendation paper entitled 'The Promotion of Japanese Good Handcrafts' to the Japanese government through the Japanese Embassy in New York sometime between 1955 and 1957, in which he wished to explore the possibility of further development of Japanese traditional handcrafts from an American point of view.<sup>7</sup> The summary of his proposal includes the following suggestions:

1. The Japanese persuade leading American department stores to register and give indications of order quantities of Japanese handcrafts.
2. These stores should send American experts in fashion, interior design and merchandising to Japan to investigate and select Japanese products and organise sales exhibitions in each store.
3. American stylists should be sent to Japan to suggest improvement in the design of Japanese products.
4. Museums, which are near to these stores, should be encouraged to also organise exhibitions on Japanese traditional and modern crafts to coincide with the sales.
5. These series of events should be effectively published, in order to impress trend-leading American families and to change their mind set with respect to Japanese products.<sup>8</sup>

This proposal was further discussed during Wright's second and third visits to Japan in December 1957 and January 1958. On these occasions he passionately stressed the excellence of Japanese handcrafts above other handcrafts in the world and the importance of promoting them for both economic and cultural reasons.<sup>9</sup> In respect of Wright's follow-up suggestions, the Japanese officials agreed for the most part, but suggested they exclude the invitation of American stylists, the idea of exhibitions at museums and the making of promotion films. They made it clear that their intention

was to emphasise the 'excavation' (*hakkutsu*) rather than 'restyling' of marketable Japanese handcrafts by designers and merchandisers.<sup>10</sup> Though there was some disagreement between Wright and the Japanese officials in the detail of the plan, they more or less agreed to implement this programme.<sup>11</sup>

## **Japan Project**

### **1. Visiting Designers and Merchandisers**

Following Russel Wright's proposal, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Industry and Commerce, the Small and Medium Enterprise Agency, Industrial Art Institute, Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) and the Japan Productivity Center (the liaising office of ICA) jointly organized a committee for the 'Promotion of Japanese Handcrafts Export to the USA' in 1957. Then, a large-scale official project, popularly known as 'Marute' (the Chinese character of 'hand' circled) later to be called 'Maruyū' (the Chinese character of 'good' circled) an abbreviation of 'Japanese Good Handcrafts Promotion Scheme' - was launched and continued to promote 'good design' for export until around 1975. The first step was made by the Small and Medium Enterprise Agency, Industrial Arts Institute and the Japan Productivity Center to progress Wright's proposal, with particular focus on the 'excavating' of existing Japanese handcrafts which may have potential for American export. Many designers were invited to participate in this task. For example, designers Walter Sobotka and Alfred Girardy as employees of Russel Wright Associates were invited by the Japan Productivity Center to travel around Japan during 1957-58. Freda Diamond and Paul Otto Matte were invited by the Small and Medium Enterprise Agency in 1957 and 1958 respectively. ICA in cooperation with JPC planned a budget of \$36,000 for up to four American designers' visit to Japan in 1958 which was followed by the Japanese government's budget of 1,150,0000 yen in 1959, thus enabling them to invite up to four American merchandisers. Subsequently, five designers and three merchandisers were invited in three groups from the USA from March to July in 1960, to travel around Japan for 'excavation' and consultation.<sup>12</sup>

Each invited American designer left a report or recommendation paper after their trip.<sup>13</sup> They expressed different perspectives on what Americans want and how the Japanese products could be improved and restyled to attract the American market, and offered strategies on how Japanese products might be marketed and traded in the USA. Among the reports, those by Walter Sobotka on wood, bamboo and lacquer products and by Alfred Girardy on electric products deserve close examination, because they were the designers sent as Russel Wright Associates, their views seem to be shared by Russel Wright, and these two reports are the most systematically written. Sobotka praised the 'impressive refinement of many objects made by apparently simple people in the pursuit of their rich tradition'<sup>14</sup> and 'unadulated Japanese characters' kept in handcrafts in rural areas of Japan.<sup>15</sup> He advised on restyling for the American market without losing these distinctive Japanese characteristics, in particular, naturalness and simplicity in shape and decoration, while giving advice on technical improvement. He detected technical problems such as the inadequate finishes on bamboo and lacquer products, the splitting of bamboo products, as well as the use of poor quality adhesive. He suggested that collaborative research would solve these technical problems. He also recommended the use of professional designers, and stressed the importance of efficiency and rationalization of work places. Girardy also observed a high capability in terms of the manufacture of goods itself, but detected lack of management,

designers and the concept of design management. He strongly repeated that the role of designer be established to play a major part in design and production management as well as merchandising. Girardy also gave an advice on restyling and marketing technique.

## **2. 'Excavation' and Exhibitions in the USA**

These designers selected Japanese products according to the following four categories:

A: Products which can be exported without redesign.

B: Products which can be exported with minor. (ie. design, size, finish)

C: Products which need major redesign.

D: Products which need to be newly designed by using the chosen materials and techniques.<sup>16</sup>

1,788 items, most of which were selected for category A, were exhibited in the USA. The first exhibition was held in February in 1961 at the Japan Trade Center in New York and in March of the same year at the Japan Trade Center in San Francisco. The most represented object-types among the exhibits were ceramics, dolls, wood and lacquer products and bamboo products, in that order. It is reported that they received favourable reaction from American buyers and retailers and 24% of the exhibits in San Francisco generated enquiries about price, with further sales negotiations that continued for a while after the exhibitions.<sup>17</sup> According to JETRO's survey, the wood and bamboo products generated the highest interest followed by glass and ceramics. The products invoking the least interest were metal products. The popular items include bamboo napkin rings, an Akita *Magewappa* Hors d'oeuvre set, lacquer ware *teoke* for an ice bucket and a mingei-style ceramic vase. They observed the American taste for simple forms, natural materials, big size, and subdued colours which was contrary to the Japanese popular image of American taste for bright primary colours. They also received criticisms in respect of their high price, the function of products (ie. how they might be adapted or how the public might be educated in terms of a newly available function), presentation, design, colour, and packaging.<sup>18</sup> A second exhibition was held in March of 1962, once again at the Japan Trade Center in New York and at the Japan Trade Center in San Francisco. The second exhibition focused on exhibits of categories B and C which were redesigned for the show. The most popular items included household bamboo and wood ware for practical use, heavy sculptural pottery for functional use and decorative balls.

## **Russel Wright's Own Design Projects**

Russel Wright visited Japan many times from 1955. During his visit Tokyo in December 1959 on the way to Taiwan, he was promoting the implementation of design policy and system with Japanese officials, while he was also involved in designing his products through the small and medium size manufacturers in Japan. Wright wrote a letter to Paul Schmid of Schmid International, Boston<sup>19</sup> about the purpose of his trip to Japan from March to June in 1964 when he was accompanied by his daughter Eve Ann Wright. It says,

For the purpose of examining production facilities available there and the designing of the products in conformance with these facilities. I will supervise the making of the samples and you will persuade producers

to cooperate in making. I will furnish the producers with drawings, models, etc., adequate for the factories to produce my designs. I will check production samples, making changes when necessary to bring the cost of products toward your price targets.<sup>20</sup>

Wright also wrote an advertisement leaflet entitled 'Elegant Informal Dining Service of Japanese Good Products Styled by Russel Wright'. It says his intention of restyling Japanese handmade folkcrafts for the American market, by designing 'small groups of products which would be made mainly by handcraft methods in Japan, which would permit a great deal of variation and flexibility in their combination because of their carefully studied correlation in design, colour and texture.' The materials used will be 'earthenware, porcelain, woodenware, bamboo ware, glassware, metal ware, and textiles. The service would embrace table linens, table mats, beverage glasses, dinnerware, serving utensils (food containers), and serving implements.' The design would be 'the contemporary modern style'... and have 'an over-all Oriental character'.<sup>21</sup>

To realise this project of Japanese folkcrafts design, Wright stayed mostly in Nagoya for three months, and guided by Takashi Mizutani, a representative of Schmidt International Japan in Nagoya,<sup>22</sup> he visited different manufacturing companies. Mizutani recalls that he took Wright to many companies including Yamato porcelain, Shinkō Shikki<sup>23</sup> and a wooden ware company in Shizuoka. There are few examples left in Japan, but a Wright designed white porcelain dinnerware set still exists in the old showroom of the Yamato porcelain Company. According to Ōkubo Hiroshi, a former employee of Yamato Porcelain, who assisted Wright at that time making models according to design drawings supplied by Wright, the dinner plate designed by Wright has multiple curves on the rim to fit the thumb in order to serve the plate properly as required by Western tradition, but also has a deep curve in the middle of the plate which was inspired by Japanese bowls. As both Mizutani and Ōkubo remember, his designs were too difficult to make moulds from because there were too many organic curves, and he failed to attract any manufacturer to take his design into mass production due to the high cost of manufacturing. Ōkubo also pointed out that his organically curvy design was a little outdated in Japan where the straight lined geometric forms came into fashion at that time for western-style ware. The 'Theme formal' glassware which are in the collection of the Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York is understood to be produced by Yamato in 1965, but the Yamato Porcelain company has confirmed that they have never made glassware, which suggests that the Museum may have been misinformed.

### **Japan's Implementation of Design Policy and System**

Designers and merchandisers who came as part of the Russel Wright project all denounced existing cheap and ugly Japanese export products while emphasising the importance of exporting quality native Japanese products which exist in Japan, but had not been properly marketed and was not introduced into American market. These suggestions came around the time when the issue of 'design plagiarism' which had originally been raised by America and other European countries from around the late 1930s, but peaked at the point when such concerns put the international trade relations of the late 1950s into jeopardy. The Japanese government was faced with the challenge of needing to implement regulations for controlling piracy while changing the bad image of Japanese products that had been created by cheap and

bad quality Japanese export items which had flooded the western markets. When Wright made his proposal, it was a critical time for Japan in the face of pressure from the West to make radical changes to design for export products while rejoining the international trading community after the Second World War. The influence of Wright's project is most visible in Japan's official creation of design organizations to implement design policy and system. The Japanese government undertook a series of measures to create design infrastructure. In 1956 the Design Promotion Council was established in the Patent Office. In 1957 the Japanese government established the 'Good Design Product Selection System' primarily with the purpose of encouraging original good design and disseminating the concept of design copyrights. The selected products which met the criteria of 'good design' in terms of modern form and functionality, originality of design, suitability for quantity production, adoption of scientific technology, and affordability were given 'G-mark'.<sup>24</sup> The Design Department that would oversee and regulate export design was created in the Ministry of Trade and Industry in 1958. JETRO opened Japan Design House in Osaka and Tokyo in 1960. The associations of designers such as Japan Industrial Designer Association (JIDA), Academic Society for Science of Design and Japan Designer Craftman Association (JDCA) were established in 1952, 1953 and 1956 respectively. Along with this set of official initiatives, commercial organisations were established and exhibitions were organised. Commercial exhibitions such as the Mainichi Industrial Art Design Competition began in 1955, The Craft Center Japan (CCJ) was established in 1959 and opened a permanent exhibition space in Maruzen in 1960. Meanwhile in 1963 the 'New Craft Exhibition' at Matsuya department store was organised by the JDCA and the 'Japanese Export Design' exhibition at the Takashimaya department store was organised in conjunction with the Ministry of Trade and Industry.

### **Development of 'Kurafuto' and the 'Japanese Modern'**

In production, the craft-based products called 'kurafuto' design as opposed to industrial product design saw rapid development which peaked in the 1960s-70s. The term 'kurafuto' emerged in the late 1950s, and the fact that it is written not in Chinese characters but in *katakana* which is used to transcribe foreign words, indicates that the concept is borrowed from foreign countries, and refers in particular to the influence of modern Scandinavian and Italian crafts. According to the Craft Center Japan, "Kurafuto" is a modern genre of 'craft', primarily hand made with carefully selected materials which have close connection with daily life'.<sup>25</sup> It loosely covers handmade to machine made functional crafts but 'kurafuto' does not exactly fit into any genre of visual culture in the West. 'Kurafuto' products are mainly household objects, which were greatly inspired by traditional Japanese handicrafts, but designed for modern lifestyle and produced in quantity, partially or mostly handmade in factories or workshops. 'Kurafuto' became an exciting field for designers who were immersed in the new trends: in particular the concept of American design in the post-war period, and the avant-garde artists' experimentation with the art of 'everyday life' as a reflection of their 'anti-art' attitude. Many other 'kurafuto'-related organisations became established and the fast development of a modern crafts infrastructure can be seen during this period.

'Kurafuto' also became the focus for representing the post-war cultural nationalism. A series of furniture design called 'Japanese Modern' has also been produced in line with 'kurafuto' design. The idea of 'Japanese Modern' developed an important

national post-war design discourse while also promoting the international movement of 'Good Design', just as the 'American Modern' boasted both national and international significance. The leading figure of this 'Japanese Modern' was Kenmochi Isamu, one of the first product designers in Japan who was sent to the USA in 1952. He worked for IAI as a designer of chairs, and he also assisted Bruno Taut in the 1930s as well as Isamu Noguchi in 1950s when they were invited to IAI. He was exposed to Western modernists' external gaze towards distinctively Japanese products, in particular, Japanese handcrafts, during his formative period, and the internalised gaze came out as his well-known proposition of 'Japanese Modern' which promotes quality products of distinctively Japanese design adopting the materials, technique and the forms of Japanese traditional handcrafts in modern ways.<sup>26</sup> Another designer who also promoted 'Japanese Modern' is Yanagi Sōri, the eldest son of Yanagi Sōetsu, the leader of the Mingei movement. Both Kenmochi's Rattan Chair and Yanagi's Butterfly Stool selected for 1966's 'Good Design' products, and their 'Japanese Modern' design became just like 'American Modern' which demonstrated the national specificity as well as the universal standard.

### **'American Way' Programme**

We saw how the Russel Wright project triggered the post-war development of Japanese modern design. However, this project can also be contextualised in terms of the American design movement as well as his own design activities, in particular, Wright's personal design activities which developed from the 1930s to 50s, the period when he launched the 'American Way' project and became involved in the national 'Good Design' movement.

Russel and his wife Mary's 'American Way' programme was launched at Macy's department store in New York in 1940. A seven page typed sheet entitled 'American-Way', which seems to be the draft for an advertisement pamphlet, explains 'What is "American-Way"?' It says:

'American-Way' is the name of a group of industrial designers, artists, craftsmen and manufacturers banded together to coordinate and accelerate the art-in-industry movement in America. It is a new collection of American-made merchandise in ten different home furnishings classifications, in the medium price range, including furniture, drapery and upholstery fabrics, glassware, dinnerware, pottery, artware and lamps.<sup>27</sup>

The marketed products are newly designed, but designs were evolved from and were inspired by traditional American crafts. As "'American-Way" Sales Manual' showed, the core research forming the 'American Way' programme is 'American-Way' Regional Handcraft Programme. It involves research on American handicraft tradition in seven regions, investigates and records the characteristics, and selects some as examples of good quality design. The manual states:

The desire for American crafts is springing up as the result of growing interest and curiosity concerning our own country. At last, we are beginning to appreciate and evaluate our own outstanding native craft skills, in the realization that they are a living commentary on American modes of life – from Indian times through the period of our Pilgrim

fathers and earliest known Spanish settlers, right up to present day existence.<sup>28</sup>

Importance is placed on handcrafts.<sup>29</sup> As an outcome of this research a 'veritable travelogue of crafts' was submitted, and this became the ultimate master catalogue of American handcrafts that gives information about indigenous materials, indigenous forms, indigenous colour etc. The designers can extract the essence of American design from this authentic record of American tradition. Thus, the aim of this 'American Way' programme is two fold: firstly, to raise awareness of a rich American tradition of crafts through selling them; and secondly, to sell American Modern products inspired by these traditional crafts but tailored to suit modern lifestyle. Wright also stated on another occasion, that the purpose of this programme is 'to develop successful home furnishings merchandise of modern design by American designers, to stimulate the public interest in the names of these designers and the public's pride in merchandise made and designed by Americans in a manner that will fit our needs today' so as to ultimately realise 'a good American way of living in the home'. It is following the model of the Swedish Government that developed their modern national design of home furnishings, but the American-Way programme is solely organised on the basis of 'solid American commercial principles'.<sup>30</sup> American Way is also defined as not European way. It negates the old formal European lifestyle, in that it is 'the 18<sup>th</sup> century' style 'kept by Emily Post', but in rather an easy going casual lifestyle centred on 'practical' things such as dish washing safe tableware, to suit to modern housewives.<sup>31</sup>

### **American Way Products**

Russel Wright had already designed what is called 'American Modern' series products anticipating the full realisation of his ideas into the American Way project. The 'American Way' projects were propagated mainly through furniture and dinnerware. In 1935 he designed maple furniture called 'Modern Living', made by Conant Ball Company for Macy's, and this line later came to be called American Modern. The most celebrated product is bleached 'blond' maple furniture. It was sensationally celebrated in the media as 'The Charm of Simplicity'<sup>32</sup> and 'a blending – but a happy one – of modern and early American designs'<sup>33</sup>. In the same year, free-form wooden ware called 'Oceana' line was produced by Klise Manufacturing. Co., to be followed by his first full-scale ceramic dinnerware line: 'American Modern' released in 1939 produced by the Steubenville Pottery Co. 'American Modern' was the first mass-produced 'designer' dinnerware. It greatly attracted the middle-class American consumers and became the one of the most successful examples of early industrial design. In 1940 'American-Way' furniture made of maple wood coloured in new 'sun-tan' were manufactured by both Monitor and Sprague and Carlton Furniture companies.

Wright's 'American Way' project was one of the most successful national modern design movements during the Depression period of the 1930s. Defined by Kate Wilson as 'Livable Modernism', the design of this period characterises the American version of modernism which reveals the ambivalent mixture of traditional English and American colonial style on the basis of the ideals of International Style modernism which is suited to the American taste for friendly comfort that establishes some distance from the cold European Modernist style.<sup>34</sup> Wright was a designer who mediated the crossroads of tradition and modern in the American context, and his



mission was grafting American tradition with Modernism to create an American national visual language. He tried to create a meaningful connection with the past, through the use of materials and styles as well as through marketing languages and images.

### **American Way Project to the Good Design Movement**

Wright's activities need to be placed in the context of the American national design movement. The first American national style was expressed in the popular expression of streamlining which combines American advanced technology with a consumer economy. It spans all spheres of life, from locomotives and airplanes to the inspired teardrop pencil sharpener designed by Raymond Loewy. In 1934 the Industrial Arts Exposition was held at the Rockefeller Plaza to celebrate this American style born out of American pride in its advanced technology. Technology became the essential part of American identity. However, streamlining was too radical and ended in the manner of a short-lived fad, though the strong awareness for American national design was founded. The longer-lived, less radical national design movement was nurtured from different sources. Wright, a leading designer of this camp, drew inspiration from the down-to-earth tradition of handcrafts. The idea of American national design was disseminated through popular consumerism and was promoted by the design exhibition activities centred on the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA). During 1938-48 a travelling exhibition 'Useful Objects under \$5' (changed to 'under \$10' in 1940) was held to exhibit modest, anonymously designed industrial products throughout America which range from plastic bowls and plates, a plastic brush and comb set, fibreglass curtains, a pocket knife, glasses from Woolworth, a travel iron, as well as wooden serving plates of the 'Oceana' line designed by Wright as part of his 'American Way' products mentioned earlier. The national consciousness planted through displays of home-grown 'useful objects' gradually developed further sophistication to articulate national 'Good Design'. In 1950 the 'Good Design' exhibition was organised by Edgar Kaufmann Jr. in cooperation with the Merchandise Mart in Chicago. They held a year long competition for new furniture and house wares displayed in the Merchandise Mart in Chicago from January to Summer, before moving on to MOMA at the end of the year for the competition final – an effective demonstration of 'Good Design' to the American public. Kaufmann published the famous booklet, *Introductions to Modern Design*, in which he defined 'What is Modern Design' and 'What is Good Design' in American terms. He claimed that modern life benchmarked in 1950 by American life demands modern design. 'Modern design is the planning and making of objects suited to our way or life, our abilities, our ideals'.<sup>35</sup> He argued that 'Good Design' is good Modern Design, that is, it has to score highly in the criteria of modern design and demonstrate 'integrity, clarity, harmony' in the 'oneness of form and function', modern human values of importance in everyday cleanliness, comfort, durability, easy care, scientific and rational production methods and democratic value.<sup>36</sup> The idea of 'Good Design' has a clear trajectory from the American Way program where the national ideal merged with the universal ideal. Wright was one of the guiding lights that led the influential national design movement in the field of household wares. He became a household name in promoting American modern good design through his American Way project and his involvement in MOMA's activities. He successfully realised and marketed his design as the ultimate example of modern, American-national, good design.

## **Asia as Inspiration and ‘American Way’**

‘American Way’ was articulated in Russel Wright’s popular idea of ‘easy living’. ‘American Way’ is an American contemporary informal style of living without servants or maids, comfortable and true to its own tradition while integrating American folkcraft tradition, but also expressing a practical and progressive attitude in using modern technology such as aluminium and plastic. The ‘American Way’ also provides the dimension of American cosmopolitan modern lifestyle, particularly integrating Asia as modern, and it is useful to investigate how this American Way accommodated Asian Craft Tradition. The concept of Asia is characteristically expressed in the idea of ‘informality’, ‘lightness’ and ‘close to nature’ which merges indoor and outdoor space by placing plants indoor and using things made of natural materials. A similar formation of ‘modern’ can be seen in 1950s New Zealand whereby its ‘new informal’ and ‘Pan-Pacific Modernism’ saw the integration of the Pan-Pacific regions’ design.<sup>37</sup>

Asia offers enormous inspiration for design. Wright wrote passionately about Asian traditional crafts, their unique materials, techniques and craftsmanship which impressed him and appealed to him with potential for marketing in the USA.<sup>38</sup> For Wright, typically Asian materials such as bamboo, grass for weaving, and lacquer were challenging but excitingly new materials for design, and it is evident that he researched and fully intended to develop these sample materials collected for him from Asia. Bamboo was a particularly important material for Wright as an image of the ‘Bamboo Bridge’ symbolises the ICA’s foreign aid programme that helped to build a bamboo bridge by using local material and introducing the modern idea of convenience, sanitation and rational living in Asian developing countries.

Wright designed a bamboo Rolly Cart for outdoor buffet supper and barbecue. The main structure of this Rolly Cart is made of circular bamboo hoops with trays lacquered in a brilliant Chinese red and the finish is liquor proof and equipped with rubber tyres which absorb bumps.<sup>39</sup> Picnic, casual buffet and informal garden parties are typical ideas through which one can practice the American way. A Rolly Cart moves around indoor and outdoor, bamboo is light weight, inexpensive, carefree, close to nature as well as being of an exotic non-European tradition that involve a strong sense of the novelty factor while expressing ‘modern’. Another example is Wright’s aluminium ‘Informal Modern’ series: an aluminium lamp with bamboo; an aluminium Japanese garden; and an aluminium flower arrangement tube. They have a typically Asian character because they use Asian materials such as bamboo or have functions related to nature, but are also equipped with the modern technology which American had progressed. The unusual match of high-tech and low-tech materials also represents the American way of hybrid creativity, and this line of design can be seen in his contemporary leading furniture designs in the USA (eg. Products designed by Charles Eames, Eero Saarinen).

Among other products designed by Wright, one can find wildly romantic, often stereotyped old-fashioned Orientalist ideas. It seems to reflect Wright’s boyish fantasy of exotic adventure that is associated with the world of ‘Arabian Night’<sup>40</sup> but is also a shrewd marketing strategy. One of the most stunning examples of this kind is the product called ‘opium lamps’ which he designed in 1959. It is appropriated from the original opium lamp from Hong Kong for a light on a coffee table which ‘makes “a romantic cigarette lighter that really works”’.<sup>41</sup> It is made of metal and brass, and

glass for its 'chimney'. Decorative flames were in either of the designs of bird cage, lotus, or open work of a Chinese character.

For a total coordination of Oriental things with American modern design, Wright presented a model room with an Oriental theme in 'Changeable House Photographs', written in 1959 contrasting with two other themes: Easter and Winter.<sup>42</sup> The house with an Oriental theme has a summer garden where the evening party is held in a setting that includes Japanese lanterns in the trees and a brass samovar on a brass table outside a sliding glass wall. The connecting living room has furniture facing the garden, a tiger skin on floor, a *Hibachi* (a charcoal brazier) full of marigolds which replaces the irons in the fire place, a basket trunk which replaces fireside logs and the slate shelf which becomes a continuation of the garden and forms a setting for the large stone Buddha head along with plants and small trees. The opium lamp hangs from the ceiling over Buddha. A Cambodian cross bow or an elephant's necklace is hung on the wall over the fireplace, a long antique horizontal scroll hangs over the sofa which has a cover of Oriental silk and East Indian cushions with mica and embroidery. The coffee table is covered with a scarf of Cambodian silk and on the table is a bronze Cham dancing figure. The heavier winter curtain has been replaced by a contemporary glass ladder curtain. The stairway has a large Korean scroll showing a nobleman hung on wall. In the dining area the table is set with various Oriental dishes in a buffet style. On the long shelf cabinet behind the table, there is an Oriental arrangement of flowers and a Buddha head, while a scroll is hung on the West wall.<sup>43</sup> These descriptions of an ideal Oriental decoration clearly tell Wright's idea of American Oriental Modern in the 1950s-60s. The Oriental theme is primarily set in the atmosphere of hot summer with the interior space opened and joined with the outdoor garden space. The interior accessories are full of natural things creating a sense of closeness to nature and spiritual tranquillity. Lightness and playful and exotic taste are also important factors in the modern interior.

### **American Japonisme**

Russel Wright says in his best-selling book *Guide to Easier Living*:

The Japanese living room is a model of planning: a bare room, into which you bring, from closets in the walls, the seats for people to sit on, the books for them to read, the paintings for them to enjoy. Though we are never likely to live like the Japanese, actually the idea makes sense for a room that must serve so many user uncluttered space, a few comfortable and easily moved seats, and the rest stored away in the walls to be brought out as needed.<sup>44</sup>

In the 1950s when this book was published the 'Japanese-style' was booming in America.<sup>45</sup> For example, Joseph Guillozet, who came to Japan firstly as part of the Russel Wright project in 1960, was invited back again for the specific purpose of finding marketable products and giving advice on the improvement of design specifically to target the 'Japanese Taste Boom' in America. According to Guillozet, this boom began from the post-war American Occupation period, but as visitors to Japan increased in the post-war period, it developed into a genuine interest in Japanese things which satisfied a yearning for 'primitive, wild, and natural beauty and ununiformity' as a reaction against the conformity brought by matured capitalism. New American apartments and office space have low ceilings, which creates a

similar space to Japanese houses, therefore, people tend to choose interior with Japanese taste.<sup>46</sup>

Indeed, during the 1950s-60s, American interior magazines such as *House & Garden* often featured Oriental decorations and Oriental home accessories. The October 1956 issue introduced the idea of Japanese *fusuma* and *shōji* screens and listed forty-four creative ways to interpret in American homes.<sup>47</sup> The January 1957 issue presented an idea of saving and organising space for the kitchen in a compact manner with a suggestion of a Japanese-style buffet,<sup>48</sup> and the May issue of the same year talks of the freedom to make ones mix and match dinnerware in a Japanese way by including Japanese lacquer soup bowls with American ceramic tableware.<sup>49</sup> The June 1957 issue featured a long article entitled 'Why the Japanese Look is here to stay' introducing Japanese-style houses in the USA and offered an analysis of how Japanese philosophy and elements were translated for American homes.<sup>50</sup> The April 1958 issue suggests using Asian objects to personalise ones own interior decoration,<sup>51</sup> while in the July issue of the same year one can find an introduction to 21 household things and interior accessories and walls using bamboo as 'fresh' and 'charming' ideas.<sup>52</sup> The December 1959 issue introduced folk toys and folk crafts and their adaptations for American modern homes.<sup>53</sup>

American-Oriental designs by Wright can be interpreted in the context of the American Japonisme began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century which continued throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and revived again in the 1950s. Wright's 'American Way' was realised in the American design culture which profoundly integrated Japanese architectural elements with a sense of space, as in the way Frank Lloyd Wright developed his American-style from his original interpretation of Japanese art and architecture.<sup>54</sup> Russel Wright who was not related to Frank Lloyd Wright was a great admirer of the architect.<sup>55</sup> His last home in Manitoga in New York also shows his strong inclination towards the Japanese aesthetic introduced by Frank Lloyd Wright and his desire for living in a Frank Lloyd Wright-style American house integrating Japanese elements of space, in which a Japanese moss garden and cascade are visible.

## Conclusion

Russel Wright's proposal initiated a politically oriented American foreign aid programme toward Asia which aggressively expanded the American sphere of economic and cultural influence in Asia. For Wright, this official programme was to test out the formula of his 'American Way' programme in the new and challenging territory of Asia, while disseminating the universally adaptable idea of 'good design' which he jointly developed from his 'American Way' programme. Wright's first major project in the USA, 'American Way', succeeded in discovering and commercially marketing American household design and taste constructed through inspiration from indigenous folk crafts, and this local design movement led to the good design movement which involved a more universal paradigm. An interesting aspect is that 'American Way' accommodated Asian materials. This can be discerned as reflection of 20<sup>th</sup> century American Japonisme/Orientalism as well as American's intentional move to dissociate from European culture. Japan's situation is also somewhat similar in its pursuit of 'Japaneseness.' Among Asian countries, Japan had already advanced its ideas of modernising Japanese traditional handcrafts to craft design products for export since the Meiji period. In Japan, crafts have long been the centre

of politico-cultural concerns, and a national agenda existed for establishing a national craft industry as well as for the representation of the cultural identity. From the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the field of Japanese crafts, in particular, *Mingei* or Japanese folkcrafts, have consistently attracted Modernist designers including Bruno Taut, Charlotte Perriand, Isamu Noguchi as well as Russel Wright, and became their source of inspiration. Unlike his and his associates' design project in Taiwan and Vietnam, Wright's own product design in Japan did not successfully actualize mass production and was only restricted to sample production. However, using Wright's initiative, Japan took the opportunity to implement an American-style design infrastructure with policy set at an official level, and within the individual manufacturing companies it established the design department, the product design system as well as an appropriate level of management style. Japan also promoted its own national agenda through this new design system and successfully marketed Japanese craft based design –notably 'Japanese Modern'.

Some parallels and cross-culturally fed phenomena can also be observed. From an official point of view, the scheme appears to be a one-way American official programme, however, it created reciprocal relations rather than American intervention. The American quest for the American Way and the Good Design movement have parallels with the Japanese quest for Japanese Modern and the Good Design movement. Conscious efforts towards learning from American handcrafts from its seven regions and the American Way project in the 1940s had a parallel with the Japanese development: the Mingei movement and its recognition by European Modernist designers; the foundation of IAI and its national project of making national design; and promotion of export products with typically national design. Both are national movements trying to establish their own distinct cultural identity. Both movements were rooted in handcrafts and they developed modern design from regional handcrafts as the ultimate source for national tradition. These parallels in the pre-war period have cross-fed and enriched the trends in post-war design via American Japonisme/Orientalism and the Japanese adoption of a pragmatic American product design system.

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I am grateful to the following people and organizations who provided precious information for my research: Yatarō Tazawa, Takashi Mizutani, Tetsuya Ueda, Hiroshi Okubo, Keiichi Kato of Yamato China Co., Reijirō Asai of Showa Seito Co., Kōichi Itō of Shigaraki Ceramic Technology Research Center, Ko Mitsuko of Museum of Modern Ceramic Art, Gifu, Kazunobu Sato of Aichi Prefectural Ceramic Museum, Hiroko Miura of the Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park and Yoshinobu Tanaka at Japan Industrial Design Promotion Organization (JIDPO), Robin Schuldenfrei, Russel Wright Archive at Syracuse University Library and Audrey Malachowsky of Cooper-Hewitt Museum.

Note: Sources marked as RWA indicates the materials collected in Russel Wright Archive in the Department of Special Collections at Syracuse University Library.

<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey L. Meikle, *Design in the USA*, Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, p.175.

<sup>2</sup> Russel Wright's document marked 'Not Published' without a title, about announcement of the South-East Asia Rehabilitation and Trade Development Exhibit, Monday, June 25, 1956 at the New York Coliseum and his observations and recommendations made during his ICA mission in Asia (RWA Box 43), p.3.

<sup>3</sup> Russel Wright wrote *Survey and Recommendations for Advancing the Economic Welfare of Workers in Small Production Shops and Cottage Industries of Taiwan, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Hong Kong* and presented to International Cooperation Administration in December 1956 stating their detailed plan of survey in these areas. (RWA)

<sup>4</sup> 'ICA Press Release on Asian Handcraft Show in N.Y 25/6/56' (RWA)

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<sup>5</sup> Harriet Morrison, 'Design from Southeast Asia Coming Here', *New York Herald Tribune*, April 2, 1958, Section 2, p.2.

<sup>6</sup> Japan Productivity Center ed., *Kōgyō Dezain: Kōgyō Dezain Senmon Shisatsudan Hōkokusho* (Productivity Report 24: Product Design – Report of Product Design Inspection Mission), Tokyo: Japan Productivity Center, 1957. pp. 40-42.

<sup>7</sup> *The Japan Productivity News* reported Russel Wright's report was submitted at the end of 1957 (*The Japan Productivity News*, 13 January 1958), but JETRO reported in *The 1959 Report on the Promotion of Japanese Handcrafts Export to the US* (1961) said Russel Wright submitted the report in 1955. It is not known which year is correct, since the actual document has not been kept either in Syracuse University's Russel Wright's Archive in the USA nor in directly involved organizations including Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (formerly Ministry of Trade and Industry), JETRO, Japan Productivity Center, and any National Industrial Research Institute.

<sup>8</sup> *The Japan Productivity News*, 13, 27 January 1958.

<sup>9</sup> *The Japan Productivity News*, 13, 27 January 1958.

<sup>10</sup> FOB stands for 'Free on Board'. The FOB price charged at the producing country's port of loading.

<sup>11</sup> *The Japan Productivity News*, 27 January 1958.

<sup>12</sup> Five designers include Patricia Keller, Bernard McDermott, Luke Lietzke, Mort L. Rothenberg and Robert von Neumann; and three merchandisers include Joseph Guillozet, Bernard Benjamin Zients and Ralph Chipurnoi. Headquarter of Promotion of Japanese Handcrafts Export to the US, 'Shōwa 35 nendo Nihon Shukōgeihin Taibei Yushutsu Suishin Keikaku Hōkokusho' (1960 Report on the Programme for the Promotion of Japanese Handcrafts Export to the US', Tokyo: JETRO-Headquarter of Promotion of Japanese Handcrafts Export to the US, 1961.

<sup>13</sup> 'Shōwa 35 nendo Nihon Shukōgeihin Taibei Yushutsu Suishin Keikaku Hōkokusho' (1960 Report on the Programme for the Promotion of Japanese Handcrafts Export to the US', Tokyo: JETRO-Headquarter of Promotion of Japanese Handcrafts Export to the US, 1961, pp. 9-50.

<sup>14</sup> Walter Sobotka, *Report on Japanese Export Goods in Wood, Bamboo, Lacquer* for International Cooperation Administration, 1957, p.26.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>16</sup> 'Shōwa 35 nendo Nihon Shukōgeihin Taibei Yushutsu Suishin Keikaku Hōkokusho' (1960 Report on the Programme for the Promotion of Japanese Handcrafts Export to the US', Tokyo: JETRO-Headquarter of Promotion of Japanese Handcrafts Export to the US, 1961, p.7; 'Nihon Shukōgyōhin no Taibei Yushutsu ni tsuite' (On Export of Japanese Handcrafts), *Gekkan Chūshō Kigyō* (Small and Medium-size Industry Monthly), p.16.

<sup>17</sup> 'Shukōgeihin Taibei Yushutsu Suishin Keikaku no Hankyō to Seika' (The Reaction and Result of the Programme of Promotion of Japanese Handcrafts Export to the USA), *Gekkan Chūshō Kigyō* (Small and Medium-size Industry Monthly), pp.18-21.

<sup>18</sup> 'Shōwa 35 nendo Nihon Shukōgeihin Taibei Yushutsu Suishin Keikaku Hōkokusho' (1960 Report on the Programme for the Promotion of Japanese Handcrafts Export to the US', Tokyo: JETRO-Headquarter of Promotion of Japanese Handcrafts Export to the US, 1961; 'Nihon Shūōgeihin Nyū Yōku Naijikai' (The New York Exhibition of Japanese Handcrafts), *Kōgei Nyūsu* (IAI News), 29-5:19-24, 1961.

<sup>19</sup> Schmid International is a buying agent for Schmid Brothers who imports and retails ornamental gift products, in particular, 'novelty' products such as 'Hummel' dolls from Germany and its copies from Japan.

<sup>20</sup> Letter to Paul Schmid, of Schmid International, Boston from RW regarding 'Food Service Group' on November 6, 1963 (RWA)

<sup>21</sup> 'Elegant Informal Dining Service of Japanese Good Products Styled by Russel Wright' in File: Trip to Japan Personal (RWA).

<sup>22</sup> Schmid International in Nagoya was established in 1960. I'm grateful to Mr Mizutani for the telephone interview on 17 July 2006 and following e-mail communication.

<sup>23</sup> Shinkō Shikki was a lacquer ware manufacturer in Nagoya and there are list of products Russel Wright ordered from them in RWA.

<sup>24</sup> Japan Industrial Design Promotion Organization (JIDPO) ed., *Jidai o Tsukutta Guddo Desain* (Super Collection – 40 Years of the G-Mark), Tokyo: Japan Industrial Design Promotion Organization (JIDPO), 1996.

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.craftcenterjapan.jp/ichi1.html>.

<sup>26</sup> 'Japanīzu Modan ka Japonika Sutairu ka – Yushutsu Kōgei no Futatsu no Michi – ' (Japanese Modern or Japonica-style: Two Ways of Export Crafts', *Kōgei Nyūsi* (IAI News), 22-9: 2-7, 1954.

<sup>27</sup> "'American-Way'", p. 2. (RWA)

<sup>28</sup> "'American-Way" Sales Manual', p. C1, (RWA).

<sup>29</sup> "'American-Way" Sales Manual' (RWA)

<sup>30</sup> Russel Wright, 'Industry Looks at Art', *Design*, 42-7(1941): 23.

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- <sup>31</sup> *Times*, July 29. There was an interesting rebuttal by Emily Post in *Time Magazine*, August 19, 1946, by questioning Russel Wright's claim for 'practicability' because his cup with a thick rim causes drooling.
- <sup>32</sup> 'Modern Maple Furniture: Extreme Simplicity Marks the Newest Maple Styles', *New York Herald Tribune*, August 19, 1935.
- <sup>33</sup> Alice Hughes, 'New Furniture Period', *New York American*, July 13 1935.
- <sup>34</sup> Kristina Wilson, *Livable Modernism: Interior Decorating and Design during the Great Depression*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press in association with Yale University Art Gallery, 2004.
- <sup>35</sup> Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., *Introductions to Modern Design*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1950, p. 8. He listed twelve criteria for modern design, such as practicality; expression for spirit of our times; combination of advanced fine arts and pure science; use of new materials and techniques; forms, textures and colors reflecting the materials and techniques; clear indication of purpose of an object; qualities and beauties of the materials; union of utility, materials and process with an aesthetic outlook; simple in structure and appearance; use of machine; and affordability to serve to a wide public.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- <sup>37</sup> Douglas Lloyd Jenkins, *At Home: A Century of New Zealand Design*, Auckland: A Goodwit Book, 2004, pp.121-163.
- <sup>38</sup> 'The Southeast Asia Rehabilitation and Trade Development Survey' (Speech by RW at Fashion Press Conference, 6/12/56) and its longer version of a document with no title in box 43 (RWA)
- <sup>39</sup> 'Carts and Carriers Rattan' (RWA, Box 23)
- <sup>40</sup> 'Notes Concerning Far East Trip 1958' (RWA, Box 49).
- <sup>41</sup> Marjorie Carter, 'American Designer Proposes Aid of New Kind for Southeast Asia', *Women's News Service*, May 23, 1956.
- <sup>42</sup> Russel Wright, 'Changeable House Photographs', October 7, 1959. (RWA) This four page type-written article seems to be a manuscript for some interior design magazine.
- <sup>43</sup> 'Changeable House Photographs', October 7, 1959 (RWA, Box 39).
- <sup>44</sup> Mary & Russel Wright, *Guide to Easier Living*, Layton, Utah: Gibbs Smith, 2003 (original publication in 1950), p.12.
- <sup>45</sup> *House & Garden* Vol. III-1, January 1957.
- <sup>46</sup> 'Amerika no Shōhin Senmonka ga mita Nihon no Tokusanhin' (Japanese Native Products from the View Point of American Merchandisers), *Chūshō Kigyō*, 14-2: 3-4, 1962.
- <sup>47</sup> '44 Wonderful New Ways to Do Decorate with Screens', *House & Garden*, October 1956, pp. 111-117.
- <sup>48</sup> *House & Garden*, January 1957, pp. 48-49.
- <sup>49</sup> 'Piece by Piece', *House & Garden*, May 1957, pp. 90-93.
- <sup>50</sup> *House & Garden*, June 1957, pp. 48-67.
- <sup>51</sup> *House & Garden*, June 1957, pp.87-89.
- <sup>52</sup> 'Count on Bamboo', *House & Garden*, June 1958, pp. 38-43.
- <sup>53</sup> *House & Garden*, 'Japan's Fanciful Folk Toys', pp. 84-87, 'Going Places, Finding Things in Japan', pp. 88-93, 'From Japan's Great Folk Crafts: New Discoveries for Your Home', pp.118-123, December 1959.
- <sup>54</sup> Kevin Nute, *Frank Lloyd Wright and Japan*, London, Glasgow, New York, Tokyo, Melbourne, Madras: Chapman & Hall, 1993.
- <sup>55</sup> An anecdote from 1964 finds him lying that he is a cousin of Frank Lloyd Wright in order to strengthen his request to stay in the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo on his visit to Japan. File: Trip to Japan Personal (RWA)