



## **I'm from Sweden!**

An Analysis of How Swedish Domestic Design is connected to  
Constructions of National Culture and Identity

A Master's Thesis for the Degree "Master of Arts" (Two Years) in  
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This thesis provides an analysis about the issue that how national identity is constructed and approached by Swedish domestic design works. The case studies mainly focus on the products from two companies in Sweden. They are the porcelain of Gustavsberg AB and the domestic design of Svenskt Tenn AB. Majority of the empirical material was collected by the author through the visit of these two companies.

Primarily inspired by the cultural study theory of Bronislaw Malinowski, the author tries to explore the potential relationship between climate condition, human basic needs and domestic designs. Moreover, the design democratic ideal is also analyzed as the social influence of Swedish design.

Based on the double experiences of both Swedish culture and Chinese culture, the author addresses her analysis to the design interaction between these two countries. Besides, some of the new trends are also discussed as the contemporary development of Swedish design, such as the feminist inspiration and the challenge of functionalism.

The author attempts to find a model of proper interpretation and advisable approach of national culture and identity through studying the examples of Swedish domestic design work.

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## **Introduction**

### *Problem diagnosis*

Swedish domestic design will be my central focus, since it is both a suitable topic for theoretical studies and one of my personal interests. To start with this general intention, I will expand my thought through two specific case studies. They are design works from Gustavsberg AB and Svenskt Tenn.

As a master student of Visual Culture, I would like to apply what I have learnt in this program—that is to analyze certain visual object culturally. Here I will try to research the design object by cultural study methods. Bronislaw Malinowski's functional theory of culture<sup>1</sup> inspired me to relate the visual culture phenomenon to the needs of human being. In one of his essays, he said, "From the dynamic point of view, that is, as regards the type of activity, culture can be analyzed into a number of aspects such as education, social control, economics, systems of knowledge, belief and morality, and also modes of creative and artistic expression."<sup>2</sup> According to his words, visual objects can always be seen as the representations of human needs, thoughts and experiments, especially concerning the cultural aspects. Universally, they are capable to communicate the abstract ideologies by specific languages. Design is one of the visual languages popularly chosen by man to express his cultural needs. In my thesis I will discuss the relationship between Swedish design expressions and national culture traits behind it. And I will try to give my own accounts connected with the existing studies and critiques of Swedish design from both a visual culture student's and a foreigner's eye.

### *Motivations*

#### *Why do I choose this topic?*

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<sup>1</sup> In the writing of this thesis, I was mainly inspired by one of Bronislaw Malinowski's books, *A Scientific Theory of Culture*. 1944 by The University of North Carolina Press.

<sup>2</sup>"II. General Axioms of Functionalism" by Bronislaw Malinowski in *A Scientific Theory of Culture*. 1944 by The University of North Carolina Press. pp. 150

Scandinavian design was the main attraction which made me come here and choose this program. Among the four main Scandinavian countries Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Norway, Sweden has more internationally well-known design or design-correlative firms than the others, such as IKEA, SONY ERICSSON and H&M. Their productions attract certain group of fans and regular customers. Generally, it's because Swedish products provide high quality with affordable price. So the Swedish wind blows across the Baltic and arrives at faraway places. Recently, it has become more and more popular in Eastern Asia. For example, many young couples in China like to ask their interior designers to decorate new homes with the pale Swedish wooden tone. Choosing and buying furniture from IKEA has become the tag of fashionable young people in China, especially the ones born after 1980s. Since this group of youths grew up and went to school under the conditions of Chinese reform and open policy, they are largely affected by western culture. When they get mature and economically independent, they begin to choose and mimic the lifestyle which charms them the most. Scandinavian lifestyle belongs to the attractions among Chinese young people, just as me, who move to Sweden and to learn about Swedish culture. But there is always a debate. Whether the cult of western culture or a Scandinavian lifestyle is reasoned amongst these newly grow-up people, or just blind worship? I will try to answer this question by checking the specialties of Swedish design one by one.

In some extent, the Swedish national income relies on the export volume. The export trade began with the raw materials and crafts, such as the iron and textiles in the eighteenth century, since Sweden was an agrarian country at that period.<sup>3</sup> After the Industry Revolution, the focus of export varied to different categories, such as food, high-end products as well as ideology.<sup>4</sup> To strengthen the competitive ability,

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<sup>3</sup> "The dominant philosophy of the Hats was arch-mercantilistic: above all they supported the iron industry and other export enterprises with duties, regulations, and direct aid. Their special favorites were the textile manufactures, whose business were relatively unimportant in size." *Sweden's Development from Poverty to Affluence 1750-1970*, edited by Steven Koblik, published by University of Minnesota Press 1975. Pp 21

<sup>4</sup> "The economic expansion of the 1870s can be characterized as an industrial revolution, however, if by revolution is meant a rapid change in Sweden's economic structure... .. At the outbreak of World War I, the part

Sweden attempted to build up its own national image, especially in the advanced industrial and design domain. Hence, the modern Swedish ideal was formed and getting mature gradually to fulfill the promotion needed in the international market. Maybe, I can say that the recent Swedish interior enthusiasm in China is one of the results of its marketing strategy to some extent.

Generally, Sweden belongs to Scandinavia geographically. It has similar preconditions with other Nordic countries in some aspects. There may be a lot of overlapping characteristics shared by these countries.<sup>5</sup> But it's still an interesting idea to distinguish the "Swedishness" a little bit away from other Nordic identities, particularly in design field.

#### *Why do I choose to discuss the identity of Swedish design?*

As I have stated above, design is the materialized existence of ideology. Basically it services the human needs. Practically, it functions in diverse ways and fulfills different purposes. The connection between design and the identities of certain groups, corporations and nations can be traced back to multiple reasons. As Penny Sparke said, "A sophisticated understanding of the ways in which designed material culture could be manipulated and used by groups, institutions and countries to form identities and communicate them to large numbers of people was apparent by 1914."<sup>6</sup> It was largely decided by the political and economic considerations at that time. Design is a widely understandable and accessible visual language that can be easily used as a means to express individual or group wishes.

The national identity functions towards two directions—the inside and the outside.

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played by industry in national income was considerably greater than that played by agriculture." *Sweden's Development from Poverty to Affluence 1750-1970*, edited by Steven Koblik, published by University of Minnesota Press 1975. Pp 94~95

<sup>5</sup> References of this part are based on the articles in the book *Scandinavian Design Beyond The Myth—Fifty years of design from the Nordic countries*. It's Edited by Widar Halen&Kerstin Wickman, Published by Arvinius Förlag/Form Förlag in 2003.

<sup>6</sup> See it in "*Design Identities*" by Penny Sparke in *An Introduction to Design and Culture (1900 to the present)*. Routledge Press 2000 (1986) pp.95

First, it serves the national population. It can arouse citizens' ethnic cultural consciousness and unite people as a whole. Second, the national identity can be the special tag that identifies the geographic, cultural, historical and political boundary of certain country. It means to define what is inside this country and what is outside it. This boundary will become extremely sharp when anything or anyone may threaten the national interest. Thomas Hylland Eriksen said, "Ethnic identity becomes crucially important the moment it is perceived as threatened. Since ethnicity is an aspect of relationship, the importance of boundaries may thus be said to be conditional on the pressure exerted on them"<sup>7</sup> Eriksen's words can be helpful when we discuss the relationship between national culture and Swedish design. Firstly, it was the Scandinavian lifestyle and identity<sup>8</sup> that were formed and promoted in the international market as a group competitive force. At this stage, the outside commercial threats came from other unions or nations that are capable to share the market. Then the national identity of every Scandinavia country was established in the international exhibitions and World Fairs.<sup>9</sup> For example, the 1930 *Stockholm Exhibition* largely promoted the Scandinavian lifestyle and the home ideal. It affirmed that which was the look of Scandinavian homes at that time. In the international exhibitions, each country has a national pavilion that helps the ethnic identity to be communicated through the visual language. Sparke's words can be the conclusion of this situation, "Each had a different agenda to fulfill—including the improvement of taste in the home market; the enhancement of trade with competing nations; and the establishment of national, and in some cases imperial, identities that would serve to unify populations under a single banner or brand."<sup>10</sup> Her words described the full function of world exhibitions that might provide a platform to advertising the national advantages.

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<sup>7</sup> See it in "Ethnic Identity and Ideology" in *Ethnicity and Nationalism—Anthropological Perspectives* by Thomas Hylland Eriksen, published by Pluto Press 1993. Pp. 76

<sup>8</sup> At the beginning, it was mainly concerned Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland. The four countries were seen as integral to sell their design good at the early twentieth century.

<sup>9</sup> Reference is based on the articles in the book *Scandinavian Design Beyond The Myth—Fifty years of design from the Nordic countries*. It's Edited by Widar Halen&Kerstin Wickman, Published by Arvinius Förlag/Form Förlag in 2003.

<sup>10</sup> See it in "*Design Identities*" by Penny Sparke in *An Introduction to Design and Culture (1900 to the present)*. Routledge Press 2000 (1986) pp.96

*Why do I limit my study to the domestic domain?*

“Home” is the concept concerning the interior and the exterior. In Scandinavia, people spend quite a lot of time indoors. It’s naturally decided by the climate conditions. So people pay large attention and lots of money on constructing and decorating their homes. They see the domestic taste as the expression of personal characteristics and interest.<sup>11</sup>

*Special climate and environment*

Sweden has a particular natural environment and climate, which can be harsh for human life. The hard climate could be a vital influence for people living in the agrarian countries, such as in Sweden in the history.<sup>12</sup> Actually, Swedes did experience long lives, bad weather and poor living conditions. These conditions encouraged Swedes to think of solutions.

The relationship between human basic needs and cultural activities was pinpointed by Professor Bronislaw Malinowski. He said, “In order to provide the constant flow of nutritive goods, articles, dress, building materials, structures, weapons, and tools, human cultures have not merely to produce artifacts, but have also to develop techniques, that is, regulated bodily movements, values, and forms of social organization.”<sup>13</sup> According to his opinion, the abilities of human activities and cultural developments can be activated by the basic needs. And the basic needs are

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<sup>11</sup> “The geographical position, with striking seasonal variations, long periods of unstable weather and low temperatures, with a sparse population and scattered, fairly minimal, later urbanization, created the foundation for the early, simple, one might almost say minimalist culture of the home...the home is viewed very much as the place that creates one’s identity.” See it in “*scandinavianism—a Cultural Brand*” by Mirjam Gelfer-Jorgensen in *Scandinavian Design Beyond The Myth—Fifty years of design from the Nordic countries*. Edited by Widar Halen&Kerstin Wickman, Published by Arvinius Förlag/Form Förlag in 2003. PP.617

<sup>12</sup> “Malthus concluded that during good times significant sections of the population would exist at minimum levels and that in hard times they would starve. Recent historical research has noted that the periods of rapid population growth during the eighteenth century coincide with the periods of the best weather. The impression one gets from these studies is that a significant part of the Swedish people lived hard and exposed lives.” *Sweden’s Development from Poverty to Affluence 1750-1970*, edited by Steven Koblik, published by University of Minnesota Press 1975. Pp.9

<sup>13</sup> “X. *Basic Needs and Cultural Responses*” by Bronislaw Malinowski in *A Scientific Theory of Culture*. 1944 by The University of North Carolina Press. pp. 95



closely related to man's living conditions. So there might be a link reaction between living condition and development. The harsher the environmental conditions are, the more human abilities will be developed to overcome the difficulties. Put in other words, the circumstances can influence development of human behaviors. Hence, Swedes may thank to the harsh Nordic environment as being an impulse to their designs works.<sup>14</sup>

Design is one of the methods changing the organic world to satisfy man's needs. To build a warm home by imitating the nature is one of the characteristics of Swedish design. Professor Bronislaw Malinowski's functional theory of culture<sup>15</sup> could provide evidence to the relationship between man's living condition and design solutions. According to his theory, all the human activities refer to the organic needs. The more rigorous the outdoor weather gets, the keener the desire of warm home is. Swedes attempt to keep the sense of nature indoor through everyday things with organic references. Flowers, leaves, animals and insects all can be motifs of Swedish design.

Sweden was neutral during the war. And the neutral attitude might be seen in Swedish lives even today. Swedish design welcomes elements coming from other nations, Japan and China for example. Adaption, modification and reaction to alien culture through design works lend Swedish products an international and widely accepted face.

At last, the advantages of Swedish design became an effective promotion weapon of tourism and export. Industrial design works often appear with images illustrating Scandinavian natural environments on the websites or manuals that may advertise tourism and industrial advantage of Sweden. Sometimes these illustrations are

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<sup>14</sup> References are based on the book *New Scandinavian Design*, text by Katherine E. Nelson, edited by Raul Cabra & Katherine E. Nelson, Chronicle Books LLC 2004

<sup>15</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, *A Scientific Theory of Culture*. 1944 by The University of North Carolina Press

reasonably set beside the design objects, for the design motive might be inspired by the natural reference. But sometimes, it can be farfetched as a marketing stereotype regarding that Swedish design should always be connected to nature to raise the sales. In this part, I'll discuss the usage of images when Swedish designs are exposed on the media. Does it address the Swedish identity properly?

### *Empirical Materials and Case Studies*

As I have mentioned in the beginning, the empirical materials of this thesis come from two Swedish domestic products companies. They're Svenskt Tenn and Gustavsberg AB.

Gustavsberg AB is a Swedish porcelain company that is found around 1820s. This company has witnessed the development of Swedish design history for quite long time.

Svenskt Tenn is always seen as the extraordinary example of Swedish design, since its color tone and leading style is quite different from the classical design principles of Sweden.

These two brands are popular in both Sweden and abroad for long period. This thesis will try to unveil some of the reasons behind their success.

### *Some essential questions concerned this thesis*

What does the marriage between art and production look like?

How do Swedes approach the alien culture references?

How does design change in the postwar period?

How is Swedish design promoted with its origins as a selling point?

### *Theories and Methods*

### 1) *Cultural Studies and Anthropological Theories*

Cultural study theory will be the basic underpinning of this thesis, since the cultural roots are the precondition of design considerations. As Bronislaw Malinowski indicated, all the human needs could be identified as the cultural needs.<sup>16</sup> Hence every aspect of Swedish identity expressed by design works should have its corresponding cultural basis. The theoretical framework will be approached in order to explore the potential relationship between the visual representations and ideological needs.

### 2) *Design Theories and History*

Design history covering the twentieth century must be one of the underpinnings when we discuss Swedish modern design, since Swedish design is an essential branch in this period. The majority design history used in this thesis is Jonathan M Woodham's *Twentieth-Century Design*.<sup>17</sup> Beside it, Penny Sparke's<sup>18</sup> design theory will be an additional reference used in this thesis.

### 3) *Feminist Theory*

Feminist theory will be one of the references when contemporary Swedish design works are described. There are numerous excellent works done by women in Sweden. Firstly, women are at the most front line encounter with the domestic issues. They know what is needed in their homes. Moreover, in Isabelle Anscombe's book *A Women's Touch*<sup>19</sup>, design or arrangement of their homes can state the personal taste of women. The Swedish social democratic movement also freed women, so they could join the workforce due to the tax education and welfare policy. Hence, there seems to be more female designers work actively in Sweden than in many other countries.

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<sup>16</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, *AScientific Theory of Culture*. 1944 by The University of North Carolina Press

<sup>17</sup> Jonathan M. Woodham, *Twentieth-Century Design*, Oxford University Press 1997.

<sup>18</sup> Penny Sparke, *An Introduction to Design and Culture (1900 to the present)*. Routledge Press 2000 (1986)

<sup>19</sup> Isabelle Anscombe, book *A Women's Touch*. 1984 by Virago Press Limited.

#### 4) *Maurice Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy*

Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is helpful when we think of the postmodern art and design works. The openness of works is the essential breakthrough point of understanding and interpretation. Based on his philosophy, a new concept of contemporary design function can be exchanged and discussed between different users.

#### 5) *Consumer Culture Theory*

To understand the purchase and promotion activities of design goods, the consumer culture theory will be introduced, since the consumer psychology plays an important role in this whole process. Why do people choose this kind of product rather than that one? This kind of question may also influence the direction of promotion considerations.

### **Chapter 1 The References from Tradition**

#### *1.1 Developed Swedish craft tradition*

##### *1.11 Starting with a little story*

If I mention Swedish craft products, what would you think about firstly? I'm sure lots of answers will point to the Dalarna Horse, the bright red and slightly silly shaped wood carve piece. It was said that this pretty horse became popular when large amount of Swedes immigrated to the States in the early twentieth century. The story is often told of parents casually carving these horses and painting them with vivid patterns as toys for kids. After long time, the Dalarna Horse became the tag of Swedish families away from Sweden.<sup>20</sup> On the one hand, the horse would remind them of their faraway homeland. On the other hand, when people visit a household that have the cute horses, they realize that the host may come from Sweden. It's a typical example that states that traditional crafts can represent the national identity.

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<sup>20</sup> This little story comes from the Chinese website which discusses the design topics:  
[http://www.dolcn.com/data/cns\\_1/article\\_31/essay\\_312/egen\\_3129/2009-03/1238206172.html](http://www.dolcn.com/data/cns_1/article_31/essay_312/egen_3129/2009-03/1238206172.html) (2010)

Later on, the wooden horse figure was chosen by young designer Thomas Sandell as the folk traditional symbol.<sup>21</sup> He transformed the horse from a simple kids' toy to a highly recognizable decorative element. He put the little horse on his cabinet doors to use its historical value.

This is one of the numerous examples when craft tradition is transformed into Swedish design. In many cases, designers use the craft elements and temper intentionally, in order to emphasize the ethnic background of design works.

### *1.12 What is the Swedish craft tradition?*

Sweden shares the geographical and cultural similarities with other Scandinavian countries such as Denmark and Norway. The isolated environmental situation decided that they had to produce the majority of the living goods by themselves instead of buying them from other European neighbors.<sup>22</sup> Environmental conditions reduced the material choices. Hence, the Swedish craft tradition is closely related to the materials that are accessible to people. Pine, wool felt, flax and clay are the materials chosen by traditional Swedish craftsmen. Craft productions often take place in small groups like families or workshops. These materials can be easily found in the nearby environment. The local materials do not need to be imported from other places. It reduces costs. This is the inevitable relationship between environmental conditions and development.

Based on the natural resources, Swedish crafts could be divided into four main categories. They are wood work, metal work, textile and pottery.<sup>23</sup> Living under

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<sup>21</sup> See it in "*Sweden*" in *New Scandinavian Design*, text by Katherine E. Nelson, edited by Raul Cabra & Katherine E. Nelson, Chronicle Books LLC 2004 PP. 61

<sup>22</sup> "Located in the far north of Europe, Sweden historically was isolated from the mainstream so the Swedes were obliged to invent and manufacture almost anything they needed themselves." Reference from the forward "*Our Place in History*" of magazine *Nordic Reach—A Quarterly of Scandinavian Culture* NO. 1, published in summer 2002

<sup>23</sup> This observation is based on the analysis of *Craft trade-production based on tradition*, which is an investigation done by SIND (The National Swedish Industrial Board) in 1981.

comparable conditions, Scandinavian countries have related skills when it comes to processing natural materials. There may even be skill and idea exchanges among these closely related countries on the development of crafts. As mentioned in *Scandinavian design beyond the myth*, Norwegians are good at woodcarving; Danes do well in pottery and Swedes are experts at weaving.<sup>24</sup> During the industrialization, these ethnic strong points are often inherited by the mass produced design goods. They are like the intentionally left clues that inform consumers of the nationality of goods.

### *1.13 How is the craft tradition treated by the authorities?*

The hints given by the SIND (The National Swedish Industrial Board)<sup>25</sup> should be noted here. In the booklet *Craft trades—production based on tradition*, the importance of and reasons for protection of traditional crafts in the industrial transformations of Sweden is discussed, “crafts constitute a link between traditional skills and new ideas...crafts can serve as a source of creative inspiration...crafts provide knowledge of different cultures...”<sup>26</sup> according to these words, the craft tradition has a twofold meaning. On the one hand, it needs to be intentionally protected as a cultural heritage. On the other hand, it’s a vivid reference for contemporary design. Swedish design approaches the crafts tradition as the bridge between the past time and contemporary lives. The conscious protection of crafts by the government and the citizens set the base for the design inspirations.

### *1.14 How has the tradition been managed?—Porcelain products of Gustavsberg AB as an example*

Sweden experienced a transformation from the crafts to industrial production in the

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<sup>24</sup> See it in “Just One of Those Things—the Design in Scandinavia Exhibition 1954-57” by Harri Kalha in *Scandinavian Design Beyond The Myth—Fifty years of design from the Nordic countries*. Edited by Widar Halen&Kerstin Wickman, Published by Arvinius Förlag/Form Förlag in 2003. PP.69

<sup>25</sup> The National Swedish Industrial Board is the Swedish government’s central executive agency for industrial, energy and mineral policy.

<sup>26</sup> “2.7 Reasons for preserving different crafts” in *Craft trade—production based on tradition* by SIND The National Swedish Industrial Board 1981 PP.17

Industry Revolution. In the first stage, it was an inescapable destiny of the craft tradition in the industrialized countries like Sweden. The wide spread Industry Revolution forced handicrafts to give in to machine production. Secondly, the low yield of craftsmen or family workshops could not fulfill the growing market needs. From another point of view, the international reputation and demand pushed the development of applied-art production in Sweden. This is the general precondition of product and design development in Sweden.

Under this situation, the time-honored porcelain company Gustavsberg AB led the transition by employing and training the artists with knowledge and skills. An important example was the artist Wilhelm Kåge who was hired by Gustavsberg in 1916. Take one of his works as an example. The porcelain exhibited in Figure 1 was designed by Wilhelm Kåge as one of the early modern products of Gustavsberg. It illustrates the central characteristic of porcelain in this company. The products are constantly designed with pretty simple shapes. There is almost no extra decoration extending from the shape. The majority of Gustavsberg products are painted with diverse patterns and colors inside the spaces provided by the objects themselves. One of the advantages of this consideration is to fulfill the principle of mass production. The geometric and modest appearance largely reduces the production limitations. That means the round and smooth object features can be made by assembly production lines without extra working procedures, because complicated ornaments take longer time and more human labor. Purposely avoiding the complex details of product outline will help to keep the high quality and efficiency in mass production. This trend is well kept and inherited by generations of Gustavsberg designers<sup>27</sup>.

The definitely changing thing with their products is the style of painted decorations. From romanticism to modernism to minimalism, the development of porcelain patterns is always changing with the trend of paintings and social fashions. This

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<sup>27</sup>王受之(Wang Shouzhi), “斯堪的纳维亚国家的现代设计”(“*Scandinavian Modern Design*”) of the book *世界现代设计史 (A History of Modern Design)*, published by China Youth Press 2002, pp. 242

progress can be detected in the exhibition of Gustavsberg Porcelain Museum at Stockholm. Generally, the pattern style is changed from concrete figures to more abstract elements and symbolic images.

As it's depicted in Figure 1, the early pattern of Wilhelm Kåge's design was something like the personal portrait. Portraying one's face onto the coins, vases and plates is a tradition in European culture.<sup>28</sup> In most cases, the portrayed faces belong to royal family members or hero. Also, the leaves, little flowers and vine running around the man's face remind me of the ancient Greek soldier who is wearing an olive garland on his head. Wilhelm Kåge's approach of looking back at the remote European art history and reusing it into the modern design work shares some common features with several modernism discussions in other fields.<sup>29</sup> It's a reexperience and reinterpretation of ancient aesthetic interests. Moreover, the casual brushwork and water-color technique contributed to the unique handicraft impression, since the personal and emotional expressions are difficult copy by machine works. This is the combination of machine produced objects and craft aesthetic quality. By doing so, the extremely rational taste of modernism and industrialization can be softened by humanity added through craft quality.

After Wilhelm Kåge, lots of designers in Gustavsberg balanced their works between mass productions and singly made art pieces. To some extent, people working in this way own double status, the religious product designer and the free minded artist. It's said that:

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the large porcelain factories, primarily Rörstrand (found

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<sup>28</sup> This piece of design history is introduced and illustrated by the design exhibition *Design in Sweden 1500-1740* at Swedish National Museum in Stockholm. (The author of this thesis visited it on February 2010) It's said by the museum description: "During the ancient times the Roman emperors had their profiles displayed on coins. The portrait legitimized their position in the remote parts of the Roman Empire. During the 16<sup>th</sup> century the classical coins became the prototype of the portraiture with another significance. Now it concerned the view of man as an individual. The portrait indicated the family affiliation and social position of the subject."

<sup>29</sup> For example, Kåge's this approach firstly reminds me about Walter Benjamin's discussion of the reenchantment of modern society. Benjamin's departure point of coupling study between the industrialized society and the classical culture and art roots inspires me a lot, when I was analyzing modern design works. This inspiration mainly comes from "*Dream World of Mass Culture*" in Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing—Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, the MIT Press 1989. Pp. 253-286



in 1726) and Gustavsberg (found in 1827), have been the most important centers of Swedish ceramics. Both of these factories have employed a group of full-time artists. The artists have had the possibility of working both with tableware in mass production and with one-of-a-kind or few-of-a-kind objects. This way of working has been, without a doubt, advantageous for their creativity.<sup>30</sup>

The so called “marriage of art and industry” appeared at the same time as the constantly emphasized Swedish design identity. Penny Sparke said, “This was an important transitional moment for twentieth-century Swedish design. It represented the marriage of art and industry that was to become increasingly important to Swedish identity on the world stage as the century progressed.”<sup>31</sup>

This “marriage” is not uniquely approached by Swedes. Earlier or later, many other companies also try to find out suitable solutions of combination with industrial products and artistic quality. For example, the Swiss watch company SWATCH began to promote a series of watches that was called the “*Art Special*” in 1985. The original idea was to invite artists from different fields to design watches for this company. To insist on this artistic and commercial consideration, SWATCH continued to try the new possibilities. One quite recent example is the cooperation between SWATCH and graffiti artist Billy in 2009.<sup>32</sup>

Though many countries and firms try to relate their design works to art roots to persuade consumers, Swedish design gains the reputation that is often connected to the humanity<sup>33</sup>. Take Wilhelm Kåge’s expressive patterns as the example again. The human touched pattern reduced the cold impression of machine made simple shape.

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<sup>30</sup> Lennart Lindkvist (ED.) *Design in Sweden*, The Swedish Institution in collaboration with The Swedish society for industry design 1972. Pp. 36

<sup>31</sup> See it in “*Design Identities*” by Penny Sparke in *An Introduction to Design and Culture (1900 to the present)*. Routledge Press 2000 (1986) pp. 100

<sup>32</sup> Reference comes from SWATCH official website: [www.swatch.com](http://www.swatch.com) (2010. 2)

<sup>33</sup> Reference is from 王受之(Wang Shouzhi), “*斯堪的纳维亚国家的现代设计*” (“*Scandinavian Modern Design*”) of the book *世界现代设计史 (A History of Modern Design)*, published by China Youth Press 2002, pp. 243 He said, “The 1930s Swedish modern design trend has been world-widely popular until the 1990s. One of the important reasons is that the Swedish modern design is human-centric. It services both the human physical needs and mental needs.” (translated by the author)

The bent line and fluid color composition compromised the hard quality of porcelain. What's the effect of his mastermind? He gave the soft and mild quality to the object without interfere its basic function. The humanistic concerning masque of object largely shortened the distance between human and industrialized material world. The harmony between function and decoration is one of the important characteristics of the "Swedish Modernism".<sup>34</sup> At the beginning of industrialization, people were worried about losing tradition and original lifestyle which they had got use to. At this layer, Wilhelm Kåge's work comforted people to adapt to the strange new world and society.

Still, I am very interested in the question why the combination between art and everyday goods became such a persuasive selling point of Swedish design. It's undeniable that the idea of good taste plays an essential role to charm customers. But superficially, the underlined label as "art" or "culture" also attract the attention of people who want to flaunt their backgrounds or social status. It can be expressed by the idea of consumer culture. People express and prove individual existence by the way of consumption.<sup>35</sup> The clothes he is wearing, the restaurant he is eating at and the everyday goods he is using all can be the media of personal representation. It means if someone buys the object owning the reputation of good taste or based on cultural traits, he may be recognized as a cultured gentleman. Swedish design as a good cultural and artistic logo could be a special tool helping people to show themselves in the social life. Or, more properly, I would say there is a constantly interaction between the design activity and consumption. That is to say designers can always be influenced by the consumer culture and the mass taste is also affected by

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<sup>34</sup> Reference is from 王受之(Wang Shouzhi), "斯堪的纳维亚国家的现代设计" ("Scandinavian Modern Design") of the book *世界现代设计史(A History of Modern Design)*, published by China Youth Press 2002, pp. 242. He said, "On the one hand, they emphasized the functional ideal of modernism. On the other hand, they insist that the importance of patterning and organic shapes. They thought that these two folds aspects of Modernism could be united in the design works. If it can be applied, the result will be the unique Swedish Modernism, other than German Modernism or internationalism."(translated by the author)

<sup>35</sup> Here, I mainly focus on the consumption feature of modernism and postmodernism period. Reference is based on the book *The World of Goods—Towards an Anthropology of Consumption*, Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, Penguin Education 1980

the designed material culture. Penny Sparke said, “Self and group identities were increasingly being negotiated through consumption, the meaning of which were injected into material and visual culture, not only at the time of the manufacture and sale of goods and images, but also as they moved into social and cultural circulation.”<sup>36</sup> It can be understood that the designed objects are the carriers of certain cultural need that is discussed by the two sides of people as designers and users. Here Swedish design is the materialized artistic and cultural quality. In the market, designers provide the quality of culture frozen in the designed objects while the consumers gain this quality through purchase.

## *1.2 Appreciation of natural and organic elements*

### *1.21 Design inspired by the nature*

The geographic specialty affects the attitudes of Swedish designers. The respectful treatment of natural materials and the elegant expression of nature presented by design schemes are the fruit of this influence.

The geographic and climatic limitations decide that there are not so many choices for Swedes to get resources from the nature, so they treasure what they can get from the environment. There is a natural principle that when something is scarce, it gets precious. Designers appreciate the soul of material as the shiniest point and extraordinary temper which should be kept and highlighted in the design objects. As it's affirmed by Swedish design strategy consultant Stefan Ytterborn, “You could even say we look at the material as having a soul to them. They are treated almost as though they were organisms rather than dead materials”<sup>37</sup>

The reasonable material choices and appropriate treatments make Swedish design usually look harmonious, peaceful and modest. It may be one of the pavements

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<sup>36</sup> See it in “*Consumer culture and modernity*” by Penny Sparke in *An Introduction to Design and Culture (1900 to the present)*. Routledge Press 2000 (1986) pp. 32

<sup>37</sup> Raul Cabra&Katherine E. Nelson, *New Scandinavian Design*, Chronicle Books 2004 pp.49

leading the way to unveil the myth of Swedish design. According to my interpretation of Stefan Ytterborn's words, the charm of Swedish design can be traced back to the designer's attitude concerning nature. If you approach certain material properly, its spirit can be well kept inside the design object. And the stilled natural spirit will be borrowed by the whole work and highlight the expressive effect. Human being separated himself from nature and other wild species, but he still has potential relationship with the environment. For example, the humid rainy weather can make people feel depressed and colorful booming spring flowers may lead to cheerful mood. The natural spirit locked in everyday objects can hint people with the ecological vibration. That's why the nature related design works can be so moving to many people.

Nature corresponding design activities can be divided into two situations. One situation is the mechanical combination of basic object and natural elements. The other one is the sense of nature narrated by design. In another word, the former is a direct approach of splicing, while the later is an indirect representation through other medias.

The famous arbor tableware designed by Stig Lindberg for Gustavsberg AB is an example of natural element attached to machine produced object. (Figure 2) In fact, this suit of tableware is mass-produced, but the very simple and graphic shape of leaves pretend it to be handmade. The arbor pattern looks like a leaf spaceman, which seems to be picked up in the spring and saved in a thick book until it's moved onto this tableware. The round shaped leaves, short cut branch and juxtaposition of veins may remind people about the spring young trees. In the long-lasting winter time, people will be extremely keen to see the fresh green leaves out of the large scale of white snow. That may be why Stig Lindberg's leave pattern has been redesigned and reproduced onto diverse new products of Gustavsberg so many times.

### 1.22 Case studies of Frank's design

Josef Frank's textile design for Svenskt Tenn is another example of domestic design with natural motifs. Frank expressed his love and reflection about nature by painting the objects onto the fabrics. Thanks to his large curiosity and passion of botany knowledge, Frank owned fantastic ability to sketch the organic appearance of categories of plants from the total figure to the tiny details in his later career. He was also sensitive to arrange different plants and animals into an integral composition harmoniously. For example, he illustrated his imagination of paradise by the wallpaper design *Paradiset* (Paradise in English), in which the singing birds, blooming flowers, heavy fruits and swimming fishes were combined in one circumstance. (Figure 3) This may be Frank's personal desire of paradise, or in another word, Eden's garden for all human being. In this composition, Frank painted the objects that might convey the feeling of happiness and cheerful atmosphere according to folk perception. In another work called *vårklockor* (Spring Flowers) (Figure 4), Frank depicted several flora motifs like tulip, hyacinth and daisy. All the flowers can be found in warm Swedish spring and summer time. The vivid organic shape, bright color and fantastic flora arrangement may lead people to recall the momentary lovely season in Sweden. Why is Frank's textile so welcomed in Sweden and abroad? It may be because his work stocks the changeable and valuable pleasant seasonal sense, and records people's fantasy concerning perfect natural environment. These frozen spring flora images used as curtain or wall paper motifs can warm people up in the winter and create a dreamy domestic environment in Swedish households.

Though Frank himself was an excellent modernist and functional architect, he rejected the cold functionalism in domestic domain. He insisted that the home should always be a place providing refreshment to people.<sup>38</sup> Hence he tried to design his textiles with a natural and casual manner, although they were arranged by rational

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<sup>38</sup> See it in "Josef Frank: A Life Mirrored in His Textile Designs" in *Josef Frank Textile Design* by Kristina Wängberg Eriksson Published Bokförlaget Signum | Lund AB, 1999. Pp.16

geometric symmetry<sup>39</sup> and printed by advanced film printing skills<sup>40</sup> at Frank's time. This is the reason why Frank's style is called "softer Modernism".<sup>41</sup> It means the humanistic emotional design actualized by advantaged techniques.

### *1.23 Evidence of fighting with the harsh environment*

See it from the anthropological eyes; the designed, painted and printed natural patterns are in some perspective, the metaphor of human victor toward the nature. In this situation, human need and natural existence stand in the opposed positions.

Firstly, people living under harsh natural condition like in Sweden desire better circumstances. Secondly, there are lots of challenges towards human being when they attempt to modify the natural existence. For the reason of living, people have no choice but change the situation through human activity. That is one of man's motivations of fighting against nature. As James L. Peacock said, "We have come to think of ourselves as separate from nature. Some of us may admire and enjoy nature—until we are trapped in a tornado or hurricane, or bitten by a snake or spider—but the general tenor of modern Western culture has been to set the individual against nature."<sup>42</sup> Peacock indicated the general cultural orientation of the separation of individual and nature. This separation is decided by multiple reasons from anthropological, ecological and sociological layers. But in the design activity, the motive is pure and the emotion is positive. Fighting against nature is to ask for harmonious coexistence between both sides. In design domain, people counter against the nature from an admiring emotional departure point other than hostile

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<sup>39</sup> See it in "*Patterns Based on Rotational Symmetry*" in *Josef Frank Textile Design* by Kristina Wängberg Eriksson Published Bokförlaget Signum I Lund AB, 1999. Pp.66

<sup>40</sup> See it in "*Early Film Printing of Frank's Patterns in Sweden*" in *Josef Frank Textile Design* by Kristina Wängberg Eriksson Published Bokförlaget Signum I Lund AB, 1999. Pp.77-98

<sup>41</sup> "Natural materials played a far more prominent role, and this more humanizing interpretation of the modernist ideal, which became known as Swedish Modern, was evident in the work of Bruno Mathsson and the Viennese architect-designer Josef Frank, who settled in Sweden in the early 1930s and became increasingly familiar as a propagandist of this softer modernism to a wider international audience through the design press, exhibitions and the export trade." See it in "*Scandinavian Modern*" in *Twentieth-Century Design* by Jonathan M. Woodham Oxford University Press 1997. Pp 59

<sup>42</sup> See it in "*A holistic view of nature*" in *The Anthropological Lens—Harsh Light, Soft Focus* by James L. Peacock published by Cambridge University Press in 1986. Pp 15

feeling. It's just like a child disputes mother's words to gain his freedom and interest.

From a visual aspect, design itself is the actualized fighting approach. It can be seen as the mixture of man's weapon and strategy. People struggle with nature for their living rights through design activities. In many countries histories, soldiers used to hang the trophies in camps to show their victor. Here, the painted natural pattern on the designed objects can also be the metaphysical trophy which is the evidence of man's struggle with natural environment. The flower pattern or the birds shape is like the symbolic trophy picked from the opposed side—the nature. Put it in another word, the natural elements appearing on the objects are the certification for people's effort of optimizing living environment.

## **Chapter 2 Swedish Democracy**

### *2.1 "Beautiful things for everyday use!"—functional design, simple shape, mass production<sup>43</sup>*

When we discuss the democratic idea of design, many people may set IKEA as the most typical example, because that IKEA produces large amount of affordable goods for wide range of people. We can't deny that IKEA is among the companies which have very smart marketing strategy of design democracy. In some extent, democratic departure point is a found or adopted term used by some company promotions. It's just like what has been said by *New Scandinavian Design*, "Early in the twentieth century, designers shared a common goal of enhancing quality of life by creating *vackrare vardagsvara* ("more beautiful things for everyday use")."<sup>44</sup> Again, it's said in *Scandinavian Design beyond the Myth*, "The socialization of decorative art, more beautiful objects for everyday use for all citizens, and good housing figured high on the list of the Scandinavian social democrats, also making it their contribution to

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<sup>43</sup> The general impression is gained from two books. They are Raul Cabra&Katherine E. Nelson, *New Scandinavian Design*, Chronicle Books 2004 and *Scandinavian Design beyond the Myth-Fifty years of design form the Nordic countries*, edited by Widar Halen and Kerstin Wickman Arvinus Förlag/Form Förlag 2003.

<sup>44</sup> Raul Cabra&Katherine E. Nelson, *New Scandinavian Design*, Chronicle Books 2004 pp.27

functionalism.”<sup>45</sup> According to these statements in the above two books, the democratic design idea is the fruit of Scandinavian countries cooperative effort of optimization of people’s living conditions. It was formed under multiple social and political conditions. All in all, the central and earliest principle was to strengthen the folk living quality in Nordic countries.

Due to the different social and cultural codes, Nordic countries may approach democratic design idea with diverse understanding and versions. In Sweden, there were some essential reasons and eras that pushed the diffusion of democratic design idea. The first one was the urbanization and population migration at the early twentieth century.<sup>46</sup> Design was the method to break down the barriers between different classes of people and raise the general quality of life.<sup>47</sup> The next diffusion of democratic design followed the enlarged social needs of housing supplies after war. Young couples needed place to build their new families. Economically, the whole society could just afford small size of apartments due to the weak economic situation after war. Large size, well decorated furniture was replaced by the simple shape, functional, easy to move and clean design objects. This economical need set a precondition to the development of democratic design at that time. Moreover, industrialization and modernization provided more work opportunities for people. People from work class had no time to take care of the luxury furniture and decorations at home.

Sweden owns the largest land area and population in Scandinavia, so the mass production became a key point to fulfill civic needs. Due to this reason, Swedish

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<sup>45</sup> See it in “*Scandinavianism—a Cultural Brand*” by Mirjam Gelfer-Jorgensen in *Scandinavian Design beyond the Myth-Fifty years of design form the Nordic countries*, edited by Widar Halen and Kerstin Wickman Arvinus Förlag/Form Förlag 2003 pp21

<sup>46</sup> Steven Koblik (ED.) *Sweden’s Development from Poverty to Affluence 1750-1970*, published by University of Minnesota Press 1975 pp. 165

<sup>47</sup> “Although the society had been founded as far back as 1845, the demographic changes brought about by wide spread migration from the countryside to the cities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries led to a re-evaluation of its social role...the svenska slödföreningen sought to raise the quality of life by bringing about improved standards of design in everyday life.”Jonathan M. Woodham *Twentieth Century Design* Oxford University Press 1997 pp. 57



design began to think about the proper solution that can balance mass production and good quality.

## *2.2 Gustavsberg—combination of production and taste*

Table services produced by Gustavsberg AB can be a good example of the compromised production need and graceful taste. As Figure 5 shows, the extremely simplified shape and natural formed white color are the base of porcelain products of Gustavsberg. This corporate tradition can be traced back to William Kåge's design which was a mixture of pure white tableware and light gray wavy patterns<sup>48</sup>. Porcelain in Figure 5 shows the same corporate ideal by fluid outline, mineralized line pattern and good function. On the one hand, the functional simple devices match the modernist taste of home, which is neither too noisy, nor too quiet. It's a comparatively modest feeling. On the other hand, the added light blue pattern reduces the cold and hard quality of industrial product. The metaphysical decoration may be interpreted to diverse directions and fit to different decors. The calm pattern can easily work together with other decorations at home, since it's simple, quiet and elegant.

The democratic accessibility is also a point attracting me. It seems that there is less class limitation in Sweden when people purchase design goods. Set Gustavsberg porcelain as example again. In the year 1991, Gustavsberg designed the table service for the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Nobel Prize<sup>49</sup>. This series of service included glassware and porcelain. (Figure 6 and 7) Though the banquet service was decorated by 24 k golden patterns, it still followed the simple, modest and functional principle. The general appearance of this suit adopted Gustavsberg tradition. The golden line

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<sup>48</sup> Reference is based on the theory of 王受之(Wang Shouzhi) in “斯堪的纳维亚国家的现代设计” (“*Scandinavian Modern Design*”) of the book *世界现代设计史* (*A History of Modern Design*) that is published by China Youth Press 2002 pp. 242

<sup>49</sup> The reference comes from the website of Nobel Prize:

[http://nobelprize.org/award\\_ceremonies/banquet/menu/soderlind/index.html](http://nobelprize.org/award_ceremonies/banquet/menu/soderlind/index.html) (2010)

It's said that “In 1991, the Nobel Foundation ordered a specially designed dinner set in time for the 90th anniversary celebration of the Nobel Prize. The dinner service reflects Swedish design and culture and has become a total success.”

reminded me about the Nobel medal which was made in gold. The golden decoration printed on service might mean to show regard to the Nobel Prize. The Prize itself can be seen as one expression of Swedish democracy idea, since it should not be influenced by race, class or nationality differences.

Another special mission of Gustavsberg is the design task for the royal marriage ceremony in the summer of 2010. Equal to the Nobel Dinner service, the royal tableware insisted a reductive shape with no extra ornament. The Swedish royalty and nationality are represented by four typical patterns. They are the Swedish national symbol, the crown, the pole star and the four-leaf clover.<sup>50</sup> (Figure 8)

Both services are available to consumers, and can be bought by anyone willing to pay. They are not extremely expensive. The point here is anyone can be the user of well designed works in Sweden. No matter who is the customer, royal family, Nobel Dinner guest or normal citizen, Gustavsberg keeps its aesthetic ideal. People from any class all over the world can get access to the well arranged design works as everyone owns right of pursuing good quality of life. This is the basic aim and beginning point of Swedish democratic design.

### *2.3 Democratization for the world?*

Besides the marketing strategy, the Swedish government also looks well designed everyday commodity as the national welfare, for it can provide cozy and high quality life to people.<sup>51</sup>

Furthermore, the Swedish design is admired as one aspect of the democratization of advantaged life and aesthetic experience from Sweden to all over the world. It's

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<sup>50</sup> Information and pictures can be found in the website:

<http://www.scandinaviandesigncenter.com/Trademarks/sek1/Officiella+Br%C3%B6lloppserien&currencychanged=1> (2010)

<sup>51</sup> See it in "Design as An Art Form" in *Nationalising Culture—The Reorganisation of National Culture in Swedish Cultural Policy 1970-2002* by Tobias Harding Faculty of Arts and Sciences in Linköping University 2007 pp.

334-336

highlighted as the shared high quality life more than simply marketing strategy. “Unlike the cultural policy ideologists of the early seventies Ljungh considered the market and its commercial actors an integral part of this democratization. Business such as IKEA and Hennes & Mauritz were now ‘not only clothing and furnishing Sweden, but the entire world’ .”<sup>52</sup> Here Harding quotes the words from SOU<sup>53</sup> in 2000 that identifies the Swedish brands such as IKEA as a company spreading democratic design all over the world.

To understand the status of Swedish design in the democratic process, I have two contrary opinions. Firstly, it can be true that the marketing share and sales volume becomes not so vital to Swedish design, since it has been a very mature brand and kept a group of stable fans and customers after long period promotion. To Swedish design as a successful brand, it’s reasonable to change the focus on ideological transmission in order to raise the life quality and taste of the whole world. This is the sublime or utopian motif of Swedish ideology and design in the democratic process.

On the contrary, this may be a new version of marketing promotion. As I have mentioned in the introduction part, the advertising function of national identity began to be adopted at the early twentieth century. After a century’s development, both the merchants and the customers become resistant. It gets more difficult for designed goods to catch customers by purely advertising good function or beautiful appearances. People’s mental need develops when the material objects can be easily reached in our well developed society. So the noble spirit of goods shifts as the added value to persuade people to purchase. Put it in another word, the style of marketing strategy changes from direct promotion into potential persuasion behind a selfless masque.

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<sup>52</sup> See it in “*Design as An Art Form*” in *Nationalising Culture—The Reorganisation of National Culture in Swedish Cultural Policy 1970-2002* by Tobias Harding Faculty of Arts and Sciences in Linköping University 2007 pp. 334-336

<sup>53</sup> SOU means Statens offentliga utredningar (Government Commission Reports).

## Chapter 3. Both Swedish and International

### 3.1 Widely accepted Swedish style

The concept of modern Swedish design emerged with clear and mature style around 1920s and 1930s.<sup>54</sup> There were two important exhibitions that helped the forming of Swedish domestic design style. They were the 1930 Stockholm Exhibition and 1955 Helsingborg H55 Exhibition. The former informed Swedish nation what was the modernistic domestic design at that time<sup>55</sup>, while the latter posed examples of developed and advantaged Swedish modernism to not only Swedes but also the entire world. Since these two exhibitions, Swedish design has gradually turned into both a comparatively independent design concept and still an important member of Scandinavian design integral.<sup>56</sup>

What is the general appearance of the widely accepted Swedish design style? It's difficult to give a conclusive concept, since the trend of style is a dynamic term that is developing and shifting all the time. But Johathan M. Woodham's words inspired me a lot in this discussion. He identified two major standards of Swedish design at the early twentieth century, which influenced and committed to the popular modernistic movement at that time. They were the "functionalist" aesthetics and the aesthetics rooted in arts and crafts.<sup>57</sup> These two roots can set a base to the discussion of Swedish design style, not only at the period mentioned by Woodham but also can be adopted as the source of latter on development.

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<sup>54</sup> As what I say in the following text, the idea of Swedish design is formed as a comparatively independent and completed concept mainly in the 1920s and 1930s, according to the two important design exhibitions.

<sup>55</sup> Reference is based on the theory of 王受之(Wang Shouzhi) in "斯基的纳维亚国家的现代设计" ("Scandinavian Modern Design") of the book *世界现代设计史 (A History of Modern Design)* that is published by China Youth Press 2002 pp. 242

<sup>56</sup> Reference is based on the book, 王受之(Wang Shouzhi), *世界现代设计史 (A History of Modern Design)* that is published by China Youth Press 2002 and *Scandinavian Design beyond the Myth-Fifty years of design form the Nordic countries*, edited by Widar Halen and Kerstin Wickman Arvinus Förlag/Form Förlag 2003

<sup>57</sup> "Two major standards of Swedish design had emerged by the end of the decade: the first of these, promoted by the Svenska Slödföreningen, its director Gregor Paulsson, and Gunnar Asplund, was committed to a functionalist aesthetic, blended with the social utopianism of the German modernists; the second embraced an aesthetic rooted in the arts and crafts, an outlook particularly evident in the glass and ceramics industries, the principal exponents of which were the glassmakers Orrefors and the Gustavsberg and Rörstrand porcelain manufactories." See it in Jonathan M. Woodham *Twentieth Century Design* Oxford University Press 1997 pp. 58

There are many terms and words can be introduced to describe Swedish design work, such as *modernism*, *neomodernism*, *minimalism*, *functionalism* etc. The Majority of these terms are based on the Swedish traditions and national aesthetics, but some of them are borrowed from references outside Sweden. For example, the modernism trend might be firstly imported from Germany.<sup>58</sup> On this aspect; Swedish design owns an internationalist style.

Johan Huldt affirmed three components of design language, which can be connected to the aims and goals of design works. He said, “The design language is of course integrated with vision, vision of what we see with our eyes; but also Vision of what we want to see in the future in a large dream context; and Vision in the sense what other people want us to see. For instance what the designer wants his public to experience.”<sup>59</sup> According to his words, the design activity includes both active self expressions and passive acceptations through vision. These two folds of actions decide that design may combine both native ideas and alien references. This phenomenon can be very commonly detected in Swedish design.

In general, there is a close relationship between Swedish and American culture, which is a common phenomenon existing in many other European countries as well. From the 1820s to the 1920s, there were large amount of Swedes moving to the Stats and building up a special blood related bridge between these two countries.<sup>60</sup> Then, in the modernist period, Swedish society was largely influenced by German ideology. Though Sweden adopted German modernist idea critically, the rational and

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<sup>58</sup> Reference is based on the theory of 王受之(Wang Shouzhi) in “斯堪的纳维亚国家的现代设计” (“*Scandinavian Modern Design*”) of the book *世界现代设计史* (*A History of Modern Design*) that is published by China Youth Press 2002 pp. 242

<sup>59</sup> See it in “*Design Language*” by Johan Huldt in *Scandinavian Design 1990-Towards 2000—The Challenge of Internationalization Demands and Needs for a New Millennium* (A Scandinavian-International Design Conference organized for NordForm90 by the Scandinavian Design Council Malmö, June 8-10, 1990)

<sup>60</sup> “There was of course the spectacular emigration between 1820 and 1924 of over 50 million Europeans, including over one million Swedes, primarily to North America.” reference is from Steven Koblik (ED.) *Sweden’s Development from Poverty to Affluence 1750-1970*, published by University of Minnesota Press 1975. pp. 165 This observation is also based on the magazine *Nordic Reach—A Quarterly of Scandinavian Culture* NO. 1, published in summer 2002. This is a magazine about Swedish America immigrations.

functional modes of thinking and aesthetic judgment are effective in Swedish design.<sup>61</sup>

Beside these two main alien cultural influences, there are many other traces such as far eastern cultural elements can be found in the following case studies.

### *3.2 Inspiration from other nations*

#### *3.21 Wilhelm Kåge*

Porcelain was firstly made by Chinese people and exported through the Silk Route to Europe. It was called “the white gold”, not only because of the expensive price, but also the mystic producing skill. After long time research and experiment, the secret of ceramic production was unveiled by a German man. Since its inception, the ceramic manufacture was widely spread to other European countries, such as Sweden.<sup>62</sup>

The porcelain factory Gustavsberg was built in the early ninetieth century. It used to produce the porcelain for royal family. In the twentieth century, Gustavsberg gradually found a proper way for its own porcelain production. The leading artist Wilhelm Kåge who was working for Gustavsberg at the first half of twentieth century, built the basic form of their products<sup>63</sup>. He was inspired by the classical Chinese ceramics, which insists the harmonious, mellow and smooth outline.<sup>64</sup> This simple and graceful Chinese porcelain shape coincides with the modernist aesthetic and production principles. The ceramic production is a complicated, time-needed and

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<sup>61</sup> Reference is based on the theory of 王受之(Wang Shouzhi) in “*斯堪的纳维亚国家的现代设计*” (“*Scandinavian Modern Design*”) of the book *世界现代设计史 (A History of Modern Design)* that is published by China Youth Press 2002 pp. 242

<sup>62</sup> This part of history was briefly introduced in the opening description of Gustavsberg Porcelain Museum. (The author of this thesis visited it on February 2010) It’s said, “Overseas came to Europe from distant China, the porcelain-or china. Gleaming and bard, yet so brittle, so precious and desirable—it was called the white gold. How the Chinese made it was for long a well hidden secrete. At last there was a goldmaker in Meissen Germany. His name was Böttger. In the year of 1711, he succeeded to make real porcelain. Not before long, there grew many china factories all over Europe, even in distant Sweden.”

<sup>63</sup> Lennart Lindkvist (ED.) *Design in Sweden*, The Swedish Institution in collaboration with The Swedish society for industry design 1972. Pp. 28

<sup>64</sup> Reference is from Gösta Arvidsson *Gustavsberg-Poslinet, Fabriken, Konstnärerna*, published by Norstedts 2007 pp. 240

high consumption process. These characteristics of porcelain making decide that its shape and basic form should be as simple and effective as possible in order to fulfill the mass production need.

Wilhelm Kåge adapted the formal advantage of Chinese ceramics, and added the modified decorative style for the sake of interesting European viewers and users. This solution was inherited by the following designers of Gustavsberg as the specialty and excellence of their products.<sup>65</sup> (Figure 9 and 10)

The approach and attitude of Wilhelm Kåge can be seen as the reinterpretation more than referencing from the alien culture. He kept the essential parts of Chinese ceramics—the form and the technique, and changed the symbolic component—the patterns. Based on the Chinese traditional culture, the classical ceramics shares many similarities with Chinese painting and calligraphy. In most of the works, the Chinese artists attempt to illustrate a plot or scene in the limited space and frame with symbolic considerations and reduced details. This phenomenon can also be found in the classical decorative solutions of European bourgeoisie interior design before modernism. The scenes of historical events and figures of family members are often painted or printed on the furniture and tableware. It may be useful to keep good memories and pose thoughts of love towards certain person. When porcelain began to be made in Europe, people mimicked the Chinese plot painted on the vases or plates, but changed the hair or skin colors of characters. This is a kind of misunderstanding of Chinese ceramics and paintings.

When Wilhelm Kåge encountered with the ceramic art based on Chinese culture. His decision was rational and reasoned. He changed the decorative pattern with European modernistic style. For instance, he preferred abstract figures to realistic ones. This

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<sup>65</sup> Reference is from 王受之(Wang Shouzhi) in “斯堪的纳维亚国家的现代设计” (“Scandinavian Modern Design”) of the book *世界现代设计史* (*A History of Modern Design*) that is published by China Youth Press 2002 pp. 242 and Gösta Arvidsson *Gustavsberg-Poslinet, Fabriken, Konstnärerna*, published by Norstedts 2007

solution made Gustavsberg porcelain become a mix blood fruit—the semi-Chinese style and European modernistic decoration. (Figure 9 and 10) The point is that he got engaged with the borrowed references, but kept distance from it. As showed in Figure 9 and 10, the randomly painted and simplified pots and color lines removed the traces of classical ceramics. The open ended design scheme provides space and opportunities for viewer’s imagination instead of limiting their thought inside the fixed plot. This is the advantage of Wilhelm Kåge ceramic design advantage at his period.

Wilhelm Kåge’s attitude was the critical and rational reintroduction of exotic cultures in design activities. This manner of thinking could inject a characteristic of timelessness into the works since the mix blood design style might be neither native nor alien. Another timeless design example is Josef Frank’s work.

### 3.22 Josef Frank

Josef Frank was originally an Austrian architect. Later on he became a famous textile and interior designer. His talent of textile design was detected by Estrid Ericson (1894-1981) who was the founder of furnishing firm Svenskt Tenn in Sweden. The most interesting personal conflict of Frank is the opposite opinions of architecture and interior design style. He was identified as one of the pioneers of functionalism architect. In the 1920s, he designed a box-like villa in south Sweden, which was the first version of functional architecture introduced to this country.<sup>66</sup> But when he encountered with the problem of interior decoration, he dropped the cool, rational functionalism and turned into poetic and emotional solutions. He insists that the home which is an area being nothing to do with the outside shape, should be as warm, relaxing as possible, since the top function of home is provide refreshment to people.<sup>67</sup> His contrary attitudes toward the inside and the outside respectively

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<sup>66</sup> Reference is from “Josef Frank: a life mirrored in his textile designs” in Josef Frank—Textile Designs by Kristina Wångberg-Eriksson published by Bokförlaget Signum I Lund AB, 1999. Pp 16

<sup>67</sup> “To conceive of a home merely as a technical construction—*une machine a habiter*—as Le Corbusier did, was utterly alien to Frank: he sought instead to retain the old Biedermeier notion that the prime function of a home



brought some kind of dramatics in his design career. He introduced the first functional villa into Sweden and he rejected the following functional indoor decoration in his design works for Svenskt Tenn. Compared with his architecture, Frank released passion and emotion in his textile designs. His vivid designs convey an idea like “Mix and Match”, thanks to his talent of magic combination with organic motifs and diverse colors.

This diversified creativity and combination appearing in his works may be inspired by Frank’s personal experience. In general, there are mainly three ethnic cultures influenced his thoughts and designs. Austria was Franks’ native county where he gained his architect training. Then Sweden was his second fatherland and main career location with Svensk Tenn, where Frank created large amount of his important works. At last America was Frank’s haven in which he exiled to escape from the war.

<sup>68</sup>This multiple resident experiences led to Frank’s mixed aesthetic acceptance and sense. Benefited from these cultural influences, he considered his works based on multiple references. And it continued to affect his colleagues and followers of design. It was said on the Svenskt Tenn website, “Josef Frank’s sophisticated and original furniture design with its modernist feature and its roots in classicism and Viennese elegance, and with its English and Far-Eastern influences—soon ousted Ahren’s and Björn Trägårdh’s strict modernist pieces from the Svenskt Tenn production range.”<sup>69</sup> Even until now, the cosmopolitan mixture of cultures and aesthetics in design work is insisted as firm tradition by Svenskt Tenn.

There are some typical examples could illustrate Frank’s effort on researching and mixing different cultural elements, such as what he demonstrated in the textile design *Rox&Fix* (Rocks and Figs).(Figure 11) According to Kristina Wängberg-Eriksson’s

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is to provide rest and refreshment. ” Reference is from “*Josef Frank: a life mirrored in his textile designs*” in *Josef Frank—Textile Designs* by Kristina Wängberg-Eriksson published by Bokförlaget Signum I Lund AB, 1999. Pp 16

<sup>68</sup> Reference is from “Wartime Exile in Manhattan, 1942-1946” in “*Josef Frank: a life mirrored in his textile designs*” in *Josef Frank—Textile Designs* by Kristina Wängberg-Eriksson published by Bokförlaget Signum I Lund AB, 1999. Pp 24-27

<sup>69</sup> See it in Svenskt Tenn’s official website: <http://www.svenskttenn.se/> (2010)

interpretation, Frank approached his understanding of Chinese painting mannerism, especially with the mountain motif. Wängberg-Eriksson mentioned two pairs of incorporating opposites in this work: the near and the far, with the high and the low,<sup>70</sup> which are popularly used by Chinese painters. Beside these comparisons pinpointed by Wängberg-Eriksson, Frank mimicked the illusion created by different perspective combination in Chinese paintings. According to Chinese aesthetics, the expression of mixed perspective is driven by the dynamic position of seeing. The observers are supposed to be subjective when they gaze the objects. This uncertainty of observation might have something to do with the Buddhism, which was the dominant religion in China. The potential influence of Buddhism in Chinese painting is concluded by Richard M. Barnhart. He said, “In this mental cosmos, phenomenal matter has no fixed form or reality, no permanence, and all existence is in a constant state of flux.”<sup>71</sup> Based on Barnhart’s words, the religious roots of Chinese culture is the motivation of multiple perspectives expression in Chinese painting. Diverse perspective, such as bottom view, side view and bird view may appear in one painting and contribute to the illusions of staggered time and space. There are some interesting similarities between the Chinese painting perspective and western Cubism. Frank experimented his discovery by combining the flat shape of figs with large size and the comparatively smaller size of mountain with depth. If we divide his work into two parts—the part of fig and the part of mountain, we will find these two figures existing in different discourses and spatial relationships. The mountain motif is more evidently Chinese referenced while the fig shape is more like Frank’s personal style as any other organic shapes of his design works. This stylistic conflict added new interest in this textile, and distinguished the work itself from other Frank’s works.

Moreover, in Chinese painting, the trend of mountain rank is often following a unified direction, from the east to the west, or in contrary. That means the painted

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<sup>70</sup> Kristina Wängberg-Eriksson, *Josef Frank—Textile Designs*, Bokförlaget Signum I Lund AB, 1999. Pp 16

<sup>71</sup> Richard M. Barnhart, *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, Yale University Press 1997. Pp 96

mountain images get further and weaker following the left-right order. The intention is to keep certain sense of order inside the entire atmosphere. The aesthetics of ordering is one of the important ideals of Chinese painting. There is an extreme example in the book *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, which could illustrate the strict orders in landscape paintings.

The later paintings of the Four Wangs, however, were more formalized. In explaining how his theory of painting developed, Wang Shujin, the descendant, five generations latter, of Wang Yuanqi, noted, “The methods of painting under heaven from the ancient times to this day was nothing but horizontal and vertical strokes. If rocks are painted horizontally, then trees should be vertical; with trees lie horizontal, rocks should stand vertical...”<sup>72</sup>

One of the aims of such scheme is to gain the harmony from the rigorous system. The aesthetics of ordering can also be detected in other Chinese art forms, such as opera and poem.

But in Frank’s creation, he broke the order of Chinese mountain and ranged them with optional orders. In the textile *Rox&Fix*, (Figure 11) the arrangement of mountains follows diverse orientations. Take the nearest group of mountains for example, they start from the right corner, turn to the left direction and end towards right again. They forms a slightly and unclear “S” figure group in the canvas. It seems that Frank made a comment on the Chinese expression of mountain figures. As a foreigner of Chinese culture, he changed a little bit of the strict ordering in painting composition and added some romantic taste in his design. It can be called a reinterpreted version of Chinese mountain.

At last, Frank played with the gradient ink effect of Chinese painting in his design. As Kristina Wängberg-Eriksson said, “Here again Frank experimented with a Chinese mannerism: Chinese artists use a graduated scale of grey in their ink

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<sup>72</sup> Richard M. Barnhart, *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, Yale University Press 1997. Pp.259

drawings, yet create the illusion of every color in nature.”<sup>73</sup> On the basis of Chinese painting principle, the prior aim of using graduated ink is to create the depth on the canvas rather than mimicking the full colors in nature. Compared with western classic paintings, Chinese paintings use a more abstract drawing language. The Chinese artists create the three-dimensional illusions on the planar canvas by the usage of changing scale ink.<sup>74</sup> At Frank’s time, it was difficult to print changing scale colors effect by neither the wooden block printing<sup>75</sup> nor the film printing<sup>76</sup> due to the technical limitation. That may be the reason why Frank mimicked the changing scale ink effect by painting different sizes of dots with diverse densities. Though the styles and techniques of brushwork and ink expression of Chinese painting are varying according to different dynasties and regions, the general usage of ink can be divided into mainly four categories. They are called “Gou”, “Cun”, “Dian” and “Ran”<sup>77</sup> (In English, they can be translated by meaning as “drawing line”, “scraping”, “doting” and “dyeing”.) Frank’s brushwork was very similar to Chinese painting principle of “Dian” (or “doting”). But here again he fight with the general rules. According to Chinese painting principle the convex and high layers are often expressed through sparse arrangement of small dots, while the concave and deep layers are illustrated by intensively painted big dots. Frank changed this rule in his

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<sup>73</sup> Kristina Wängberg-Eriksson, *Josef Frank—Textile Designs*, Bokförlaget Signum I Lund AB, 1999. Pp 112

<sup>74</sup> This observation is based on the book, Richard M. Barnhart, *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, Yale University Press 1997.

<sup>75</sup> The wooden block printing skill was firstly discovered in ancient India and imported by the European with other Asia goods such as china and tea through the Silk Road trade. The number of wooden blocks is decided by the number of colors needed in textile. Every piece of block can only be used for single color printing. At the early stage, Frank’s textiles were mainly printed by this technique. Reference from *Josef Frank—Textile Designs* by Kristina Wängberg-Eriksson published by Bokförlaget Signum I Lund AB, 1999

<sup>76</sup> Film printing means printing through screens. The designed patterns are copied onto the screen by film exposure principle. The process of film printing is described as follow: “the cloth is spread and glued on a long printing table, which is heated to make the dye paste dry faster. Riders attached to bars along the tablesides determine exactly where to place the printing frame. The dye paste is spread on the screen with a scraper and dyeing of the fabric occurs through the varnish-free film openings. Every second repeat is first printed with one color, then the remaining repeats are printed at a second passage over the cloth. This operation is repeated for each color, followed by washing and drying.” Reference from *Josef Frank—Textile Designs* by Kristina Wängberg-Eriksson published by Bokförlaget Signum I Lund AB, 1999. Pp 77

<sup>77</sup> These four general techniques of Chinese painting can be found in lots of books. For example, Wang Kewen, *The Aesthetics and Techniques of Landscape Painting*, Shanghai Press, 1999. (This is the translated title and author name. The original Chinese title is, 王克文, *山水画审美与技法*, 上海书店出版社, 1999.) And the examples of these techniques can be found in Richard M. Barnhart, *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, Yale University Press 1997.

design again. He decided the dots arrangement without certain law or rule. It seems that he just painted them casually and mainly focused on the graphic impact rather than the ruled aesthetics. In fact, he reduced the spatial reasonableness and retold it with a graphic language. It should be emphasized here that Frank references from other culture and gives his own accounts on it. This is an active usage of ethnic cultural and artistic reference in design process.

There comes another question: should we identify Frank's or Svenskt Tenn work as Swedish design, since Frank himself is not original Swedish and he is largely influenced by other cultural sources.

If we see it from the motif, style and reference aspects, it must be tricky to classify Frank's work. There is no definite clue can lead our way to give an exact conclusion of his mixed design style. And this situation can be commonly found in more and more contemporary design works, since the development of transportation, communication and open scale of society in most nations provide more opportunities for designers to see, hear and touch the cultural reference from any corner of this world. I'm thinking that should we identify this blurring identity as one of the modern or contemporary design identity? As Josef Frank's example, his work was primarily related to his architect training in Austria. And then his name was closely connected to Sweden—the most important place for his career and his second homeland. With this double nationality, it's difficult to identify the entire work of Frank. But the majority of his furniture and textile design are produced in Sweden or by Swedish companies even after he passes away. Partly due to the commercial reason, his work can be seen as Swedish design, but an extraordinary example. As what Penny Sparke said, "Increasingly, through the twentieth century, identities linked to place—the nation in particular—came to be determined less and less by inherited cultural ideas and more and more by new patterns of consumption."<sup>78</sup> That

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<sup>78</sup> See it in "Redefining Identities" by Penny Sparke in *An Introduction to Design and Culture (1900 to the present)*. Routledge Press 2000 (1986) pp. 208

is to say, the design identity can be influenced more and more by commercial interest, since the consumer culture plays essential role in the design development today. The boundary between nations becomes increasingly unclear in order to fulfill the common needs in design domain.

## **Chapter 4 The new light**

### *4.1 Feminist touch*

Compared with men, women are commonly seen as the consumers other than designers or producers in the production and consumption process. And what women usually do with their homes is often identified as craft or decoration more than professional design.<sup>79</sup> Though this kind of opinion is leading the majority trend in the social division of labor, Swedish women are fighting for the fairness of work opportunities. A survey done in 1970s can show the higher work rate of women in the Swedish society. It's said, "The wage-earners' fund plan nicely illuminated the effective meaning of the equalization of women in the marketplace. Swedish women had come to hold jobs far more commonly than before, and more commonly than women in any other western democracy, but their status as workers—and professionals—had little political translation"<sup>80</sup> Women's job advantage is pretty obvious in Swedish design domain as well. Beside the fair job opportunities, Swedish female designers undertake more essential positions and behave actively in many important tasks. Some examples can show that female designer's capacity and taste are accepted by Swedish society. For example, the excellent female interior designer and architect, Ulla Christiansson won the Excellent Swedish Design Award in 1998. And one of her most famous job is the design work of Beijing Swedish Embassy in China. More than a simply architecture or interior design task, this

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<sup>79</sup> "In the field of product design—meaning craft and manufactured objects—women designers have been mostly identified with the decorative arts and in their role as consumers rather than being viewed as professional product designers."—reference from Joan Rothschild and Victoria Rosner "*Feminism and Design*" in *Design And Feminism—Re-visioning spaces, places and everyday things* edited by Joan Rothschild 1999 by Rutgers, The State University.

<sup>80</sup> Donald Meyer *Sex And Power—The Raise of Women in America, Russia, Sweden and Italy* (Second Edition with a New Introduction) by Wesleyan University Press 1989 pp 73

project implies her talent is approved by both the mass and the Swedish government. As the result, the Beijing Swedish Embassy shows Ulla Christiansson understandings of combined function and national identity of architecture.

But what is the muse of Swedish female designer? Firstly, as I have written in former chapter, Nordic people spend more time at home than other westerners due to the climate reason. So they care more about the indoor atmosphere. Secondly, women mind more about what their home look like than men do, because women have closer relationship with home determined by multiple reasons. For example, women's responsibility and relationship with kids decide that they have deeper understanding and observation of security and facility in household. They should know what might be dangerous for babies as well as what could be suitable for the younger. Thirdly, the decorative taste is connected to the self-expression. Isabelle Anscombe said, "It was the Aesthetic Movement that first introduced the idea that a woman's touch should-indeed, must-be tasteful, and idea that was liberalized by Elsie de Wolfe and Syrie Maugham's belief that an interior could be a vital means of self-expression for women, although only for those who could afford it"<sup>81</sup> According to the traditional opinion, the home domain is more intimately related to the hostess. Though the social code on the gender problem is changed, the home is still a feminine concept more than masculine. From this aspect, women should be naturally more capable in domestic and interior design.

The typical example is Estrid Ericson, the founder of Svenskt Tenn. She was a lady constantly fascinated by indoor decoration and arrangement. Svenskt Tenn was originally a firm known of beautiful pewter pieces. After the international breakthrough of pewter around 1920s, Estrid opened the department of interior decoration in Svenskt Tenn<sup>82</sup>. She used her own home as a lab to experiment her

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<sup>81</sup> Isabelle Anscombe, *A Women's Touch—Women in Design from 1860 to the Present Days*, published by Virago Press Limited 1984 pp. 166

<sup>82</sup> Reference is from *Josef Frank—Textile Designs* by Kristina Wängberg-Eriksson published by Bokförlaget Signum I Lund AB, 1999. Pp 18-19

daily new ideas of interior design and developed the successful experiences into Svenskt Tenn products. Estrid Ericson liked to rearrange her apartment occasionally and find creative ideas from this hobby. For example, it's said that she gained ideas from the books she could reach at home.<sup>83</sup> Her love of books is inherited by Svenskt Tenn designers even till today. At the store in Stockholm, books are used as decorations for window display. (Figure 13) In this figure, books no matter new or old are put together with diverse designed objects and displayed in the transparent book shelf. Books function as the symbol of passed time or memories since books can be seen as the records of history and culture. They are the metaphor of old times. Especially, the old books which could emphasize the feeling of nostalgia are the prevalent and classic decoration in European household. And the transparent plastic book shelf with round corners is a contemporary design piece, even conveys a little futurism sense. The old smell books combined with youth style shelf form again the mixed aesthetic experience. This is a typical Svenskt Tenn way of decoration, which beautifies home by putting different lovely things together. It can be interpreted that current designers show the respect to Ericson by adopting the decorative function of books from her hobbies. Her delicate female emotion always illuminates Svenskt Tenn style. Sometimes, lady's nature of home arrangement gives her the exact taste of design. It's more like the emotional decision than the rigorous consideration.

At this point, both Estrid Ericson and Josef Frank liked to gain the conflicting harmony from the juxtaposed objects. That means to put diverse things together and make the home looks comfortable. Frank's creation of *Figaro och Tolvekarna* (Figure 12) is a good example. Clearly, Frank was inspired by Ericson's life attitude at that time. In this piece, the carefully depicted oak trees are referenced from Ericson's summer house, which was called Tolvekarna. It was on a little hill covered by oak trees.<sup>84</sup> And Figaro was Ericson's canary. Frank painted the figures of this

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<sup>83</sup> Reference is from Svenskt Tenn official website: <http://www.svenskttenn.se/> (2010)

<sup>84</sup> Reference is from *Josef Frank—Textile Designs* by Kristina Wängberg-Eriksson published by Bokförlaget Signum | Lund AB, 1999. Pp 21



bird among the oak trees. Basically, the color choice of bright yellow and grass green is the color comparison which conveys the feeling of warm spring or early summer. The vivid singing birds and lovely oak trees contribute to a cheerful atmosphere inside this textile design. It's saying something about beautiful summer time. In fact Frank did enjoyed pleasant summer in Tolvekarna. He set the entire mood as happy and relaxing summer holiday in this piece. To transfer the real life experience and emotion to the art creation may remind the users with their personal life stories that could be similar to the mood communicated by design work. This is so called humanity and resonance in Frank and Ericson's works. Maybe it's the uncontrolled, fearless and fantastic creations that differs Svenskt Tenn products from the formal Swedish design. It's a little bit more romantic, a little bit more emotional and a little bit more feminine. After Estrid Ericson, there is another lady Ann Wall took over the firm and continued the fantasy of Svenskt Tenn.

## *4.2 Anti-functional & Story telling design*

### *4.21 Nonfunctional design*

Growing up with the classical Swedish style, new designers try to announce their own ideas toward the "Swedishness" and good taste. In some extent, the Swedish functionalism becomes a barrier that stops young designer's imagination and creation. So the new generation attempts to challenge the functional specialty of objects. Though functionalism used to be one of Svenskt Tenn motifs especially when it was founded by Ericson, designers today want to break down this modernist framework and find the new way of design. By this motivation, Svenskt Tenn produces a series of pewter objects, which are directly called *Non Funkis Tenn (Nonfunctional Pewter)* (Figure 14)

With this suit of designed objects, designers keep the organic shape as the traditional Svenskt Tenn motif, but play with the rational functionalism. Their appearances are almost copied from the natural shapes, such as the coral and shell. The irregular

shapes even with speckles and deformity make sense that they are really collected from the nature. They just bring in the fresh natural sense by the inartificial and imperfect look. People cannot tell whether they own exact function or not. The title *Non Funkis Tenn* (*Nonfunctional Pewter*) could be interpreted as *Open Functional Pewter*. Since there is no strict way of usage, people can just hold, play or display them.

This openness of objects reminds me with Merleau-Ponty's words, "Science is and always has been that admirably active, ingenious, and bold way of thinking whose fundamental bias is to treat everything as though it were an object-in-general—as though it meant nothing to us and yet was predestined for our own use."<sup>85</sup> Merleau-Ponty concluded the general attitude of art work interpretation by saying words above. It's a very subjective attitude of appreciating art works. The viewer feeling controls the entire art experience. This attitude is transformed into the design work by contemporary designers. What is opened here is the concept of object function. The blurring usage challenges modernist functionalism that put the usage at the primary position. And with the *Non Funkis Tenn* ones, function is almost reduced to disappear. The essence of work here is only existence. The objects just show themselves with exact shapes. The meaning, the usage and the feeling all are up to the viewers' decision. The design motivation submits itself to the viewer desire and feeling. The human imagination and reaction could not be limited by the artificial objects and predicated functions.

#### 4.22 *Design is talking...*

In general, Swedish design usually rejects the cool rational motivation. According to different spatial conditions, designers use diverse languages to discuss the humanistic needs by diverse visual languages. Another new trend is to tell stories or express thoughts by designed objects.

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<sup>85</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind* in *Continental Aesthetics-Romanticism to Postmodernism*, edited by Richard Kearney and David Rasmussen, published by Blackwell Press 2001, pp 288

Contemporary design object shares the common feature with painting. They can just show the feeling of single moment. Designers may get inspiration from long lasting experience, but they can just concentrate the dynamic movement and sense with freeze frame in design work. Can design work talk? Many designers say yes. The clue may be found in Svenskt Tenn recent exhibition *Going Gray*<sup>86</sup>. (Figure 14. 15. 16 and 19)

The main aim of this exhibition is to question the contemporary urban life with domestic design works by Mats Gustafson and Ted Muehling. (Figure 15) The whole color tone of this exhibition is set by different scales of gray that may be betrayed by the title. It's a large shift toward traditional Svenskt Tenn color which is originally bright and vivid. The style is simple and minimalism, which gives viewers more space of imagination. In fact, imagination is the key word of storytelling objects. Since the things themselves could not show the dynamic scenes, what they can do is to throw out the hint to arouse people's imagination. *Going Gray* is supposed to give the example of ideal home that can comfort people's spirit in the noisy urban life. Many motifs come from the ocean. (Figure 15) From the geographic angle, Sweden is a maritime country. People are usually familiar with the sea. And from the metaphysical departure, sea is the source of life. And from the quiet ocean, people may get the soul consolation. Again, it implies that the meaning of life becomes discussible, when people encounter with the ocean—the source of life.

As it's shown in Figure 16, this plate is also non-functional. It's like a sculpture more than artificial work. The appearance may come from the sandy beach. After reflux, there are numerous holes remained in the sand with the shape of bubble. When the tide comes again, these bubbles will disappear in the sea water. This piece of design

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<sup>86</sup> Domestic design exhibition *Going Gray* hold by Svenskt Tenn in its store in Stockholm. (The author of this thesis visited it on February 2010)

shows an image of single moment in the constantly changing tide movement. It freezes the bubble trace in the sand at a specific second. But when I see it, the dynamic movement of tide begins to repeat in my mind and the different looks of bubbles in sand flashes time and time again. Though it's just a personal aesthetic experience of mine, the designer of this piece does succeed to create the illusion that may tell story to the viewers. The immobile plate draws the moving image in the environment of people's mind other than the reality. At this point, viewer is cut away from the real world and kept in the illusion. In this situation, there might be a dialogue between the beholders and the silent work. At this layer, the open functional piece shares the parallel meaning with postmodern paintings and sculptures.

## **Chapter 5 The utility of Swedish design in propaganda**

### *5.1 Travel for Design*

Situated in a faraway land, Sweden as well as other Scandinavian countries is not so well known to people outside it. Majority of the travelers may considerate the southern Europe, such as France, Italy and Spain as their primary destinations. For long time, Scandinavia is a mysterious realm to the rest of the world. To open the door for travelers, there are mainly two approaches seem to be effective. The first one is the wildly cultural propaganda, while the second one is the reconstruction of national specialty. In these processes, design is employed as one of the attractions for international travelers.

For example, the Stockholm subway stations that are painted with diverse motifs since 1950 are commonly described as one of the tourist spots with designed specialty in this city.<sup>87</sup> There are some descriptions in one of the Chinese book called *Design in Scandinavian*.<sup>88</sup>(Figure 18) It says, "If you take the Stockholm

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<sup>87</sup> The Stockholm subway stations began to be decorated with different themes from 1950. It is 110 kilometers in total. About 140 artists join this project at different time. Now, more than 90 percent of Stockholm subway stations are oriented by the contemporary art and design works.

<sup>88</sup> The original title is in Chinese called 设计北欧 (translated by author) (Figure 18), written by Chen Yan'an published by Chongqing Press in 2009. It is a book about design and travel in Scandinavia.

subway, you will experience a party of design works. You will see wonderful stations which are decorated with different creativities and motifs.”<sup>89</sup> The style of this kind of text expression is something like advertisement, which contributes to an undoubted attraction of Sweden to Chinese people. It gets more and more popular in recent years when Swedish design companies like IKEA and H&M introduce the cozy and simple Swedish lifestyle to China. Especially for people living in the cities, the Swedish goods may symbolize an affordable western mode of life (especially the Nordic mode of life). Being obsessed by the materialized Swedish life, people are easily caught again by the tourism spot corresponding to design like what is presented in the book above. In fact, there is a notable new trend of Nordic tourist line in China. After IKEA entered Chinese market in 1998 and H&M moved in at 2007, there has been more and more Scandinavian guide tour promoted by Chinese travel agencies through the newspapers or magazines. Put it in another word, the tourism development of Sweden has substantial connection with the commercial success of Swedish goods.

Following the achievement of international trade, the next affected part is the education. Or say it more properly; the development of Swedish Education Industry has become another fruit of its ideological export. An increasing number of international students choose Sweden to take higher education and find their jobs in the future. Some of them especially focus on design and engineering fields. This development advanced the cultural communication between Sweden and the world. That means Swedish design might be continually influenced and enhanced from this aspect.

All in all, Sweden exports its lifestyle and ideology by selling the well designed goods at first. The well accepted mode of life functions as propagandist weapon to

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<sup>89</sup> The original text is, “搭乘斯德哥尔摩地铁，有如参加设计派对，各种艺术创作将车站装点得各具其趣。”(translated by author) *设计·北欧* (*Design in Scandinavia*, English title translated by author), written by Chen Yan’an published by Chongqing Press in 2009. It is a book about design and travel in Scandinavia.

attract more consumers and followers in other trade and activities such as tourism and education. It turns into a positive circle that pushes the project cooperation and idea exchange between Sweden and the world.

### *5.2 How does it function?*

Turn back to the visual culture departure point. How are the Swedish design and lifestyle promoted visually? There should be many choices and solutions. The most representative and efficient one that I find is the juxtaposition of design and natural source images. No matter for the commercial demand or cultural consideration, people likes to add images of animals, plants and landscapes beside or beneath the designed object pictures. (Figure 17, 18 and 19) As what is shown in Figure 17, the pink petals take half space of the cover page of this official communicational material of Swedish design<sup>90</sup>. Before the images of designed objects that will be introduced in the following pages, this large size image of flower appears as forecast with the general descriptive text on the cover page. It may attempt to hint the readers with the portential association between Swedish design and the nature. In some extent, this arrangement is a little arbitrary, since this flora image has rare relationship with all the following contents. It implies the prejudice of Swedish design and natural reference. Almost the same thing happens in Figure 18 which illustrates one of the Chinese versions of Swedish design introduction. On this page, the Swedish designer Efva Attling's silver design works are introduced. Two sprays of violet are chosen here for presentation of two silver rings. The rings are worn by violet sprays which look like human figures. There is no clear connection between Attling's design and violet can be found in the text. Is it just for beautifying the graphic page? Or it again tries to link Swedish design to the nature unreasonably?

The example in Figure 19 seems to be comparatively logical than the other two above. The swan itself can be seen as the metaphor of desire for quiet life, since its

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<sup>90</sup> *Swedish culture—Swedish design*, published by the Swedish Institute, August 2005 FS 111c

figure is always presented as the symbol of harmonious mood in art works. The temper of this image shares similar mood with the design works. So it may function in the way of potential connection between the visual and the design. But rationally speaking, it tends to exaggerate the metaphysical function of swan image that might inspire viewer with nature feeling.

### *5.3 Why is it successful?*

Sale and purchase is a pair of activities through which designed goods are transferred among different groups. Hence it may be better to divide the objects into two sides to discuss the promotion and consumption activities.

From the group interest perspective, Swedish design is transformed as an entire concept as well as a ruler to set the boundary of “Swedishness” and “Nonswedishness”. The aim of such strategy can be separated into two folds. For people from Sweden, this boundary can enhance their consciousness of national culture and tradition. This can be seen as the cultivating meaning of domestic citizens. The more essential aspect is to emphasize the ethnic specialty as the selling point of Swedish export goods. After the World War II, the whole world need economical recovery, many countries paid large attention to export. And to Swedes, export is always an important means to raise national income.<sup>91</sup> To be competitive in the battle of marketing share, the “Swedishness” of design as natural, humanistic, craft based and modern is introduced, repeated and emphasized. The ethnic cultural based design motivations confirm the specialty and quality of Swedish goods, which are distinguished from other products with different cultural, geographic and historical qualities. The “Swedishness” of goods linked with natural and craft inspiration becomes quite different from the luxury “Frenchness”, experimental “Italianness”

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<sup>91</sup> Reference is based on “Structural Change and Economic Growth in Nineteenth-Century Sweden” in Steven Koblik (ED.) *Sweden’s Development from Poverty to Affluence 1750-1970*, published by University of Minnesota Press 1975.pp.92-135

and advanced technical “Germaneness”<sup>92</sup>. Economically speaking, the noncopyable and irreplaceable cultural base is the core competence of Swedish design and export goods. It's the fruit of marketing Swedish culture and lifestyle.

From the consumer culture perspective, design products are seen as the media of communication. Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood said, “Man is a social being. We can never explain demand by looking at the physical properties of goods. Man needs goods for communicating with others and for making sense of what is going on around him.”<sup>93</sup>They analyzed the consumer behaviors through anthropological eyes. The purchase behavior betrays human need and desire of materials. But why people choose certain kind of goods instead of others? It may be that this specific product shares the common quality with man’s desire. In another word, people choose and purchase this object, since it owns the specialty that can matches people’s need. From this aspect, the precondition of promotion is to catch consumer’s interest and need. Follow this framework; we can see how Swedish identity becomes the selling point of design products. People choosing Swedish products may be attracted by not only the regular taste and quality, but also the added cultural connotations.

In the maturely industrialized world, the fresh feeling of flawless machine made products fades away gradually. People turn to be tired of the unified shape with perfectly checked details. Especially after the War, the pains of fighting forced people to seek for humanistic medicine which may help them recover from the bad memories. Care of environment, escaping from the urban and returning to the childhood all take essential part of human mental need. This general trend provides a positive situation to the development of Swedish design. The Swedish cultural and

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<sup>92</sup> This observation is based on the comparative study by Wang Shouzhi (王受之), *A History of Modern Design (世界现代设计史)*, China Youth Press 2002. The most relative chapters are the “Chapter Ten The International Modern Design (1)” and the “Chapter Eleven The International Modern Design (2)” in this book. Additional information is gained from Wang Shouzhi (王受之), *Nordic White Night—A Tour of Scandinavian Design (白夜北欧—行走斯基的纳维亚设计)*, Heilongjiang Press 2006.

<sup>93</sup> Mary Douglas & Baron Isherwood *The World of Goods—Towards and Anthropology of Consumption* PENGUIN PRESS 1978 PP.95



social ideal injected into design works, such as the natural reference, humanistic concerning, and imperfect craft style just match people's psychological demand. The modest Swedish design might comfort people from the stressful urban life and cold industrialized environment. This could be why the design inspirations become selling point and propagandist power in the marketing strategy.

## **Conclusion**

In the above, the separate characteristics of Swedish domestic design have been discussed. They are the traditional and natural based reference, the democratic departure point, internationally affected feature, postwar new trend and utility of propaganda. The former four chapters illustrate the stylistic specialties according to different cultural and historical roots, while the last one functions as a summary which discusses the relationship between design advantages and cultural promotions in the international realm.

The first two chapters illustrate the well-known Swedish design traits that have intimate relationship with nature, national craft tradition and democratic ideas. These three factors are the general preconditions of Swedish design.

Departing from my personal experience to both Chinese culture and Swedish culture; I connect the civil characteristics of the two countries to some extent, especially when I discuss the foreign influences on Swedish design in chapter three. In certain examples, Swedish design gets the inspiration from the color strategy, composition and techniques of the Chinese paintings.

Chapter four introduces some new trends of Swedish contemporary design. Among them, there is a notable critique of the functional ideal of Swedish design tradition.

Chapter five comes back to an overall standing point to discuss the integral effect of

Swedish design. Different countries have different strategies to gain the business advantages. Generally speaking, design of Sweden owns larger power in the commercial competitions than those are in many other countries. For example, China depends on mass productions with low budget in the competition of export market, while Sweden relies on design advantages. As one of the national strongpoints, design functions as the medium between the ethnic culture and marketing strategy. It interprets Swedish national culture into understandable visual languages and transforms it as powerful weapon in the international competitions.

This usage of design serves two folds of interest. On the one hand, it promotes Swedish national culture, lifestyle and political ideals on an international scale. It makes the faraway and mysterious land become well known and desired by the world. People get to know this country and its cultural tradition by seeing and using the designed goods. Due to the democratic departure point, the affordable, widely accepted taste and high quality help the large scaled diffusion of Swedish design. It means more and more countries and people may know Sweden through design. Currently, it seems that design becomes a welcomed way of introducing Sweden to the world.

On the other hand, the development of design enhances the progress of other social aspects. As what I have analyzed in the prior chapter, design drives a chain reaction in many other domains. Firstly, it helps the share of market in the export competition. By promotion of culturally based design, Swedish goods are tagged by their irreplaceable nationality. It largely enhances the core competitiveness of Swedish products. Secondly, it provides more opportunities for the cultural and educative exchange in the world wide scale. Young people know of this country by getting touch with Swedish design. They come here to travel and study. They bring in the information and thought from the places out of Sweden and carry Swedish specialties back. This exchange intensifies the communication between Sweden and the world.

The gradually developing openness of this country provides more inspiration and creativities to design activities. This could be called a positive circle of development.

To sum up, the position of design in Sweden set an example of approaching tradition and culture in contemporary national development. Undoubtedly, culture, tradition and historical heritage harbour immeasurable values. From this point, countries that own abundant historical and cultural resource may get inspired by the Swedish model. Understand it deeply, interpret it properly and use it advisably is a more energetic way of treating national history and culture.

## Image Appendix:



**Figure 1**

Porcelain designed by Wilhelm Kåge, produced by Gustavsberg AB from 1917 till 1960

Photographed by author at Gustavsberg Porcelain Museum at Gustavsberg



**Figure 2**

Ceramic tableware designed by Stig Lindberg at early 1960s, produced by Gustavsberg AB from 1960 till 1974

Photographed by author at Gustavsberg Porcelain Museum at Gustavsberg



**Figure 3**

Textile design *Paradiset* by Josef Frank

Photographed by author at Svenskt Tenn store in Stockholm



**Figure 4**

Textile design *vårklockor* by Josef Frank

Photographed by author at Svenskt Tenn store in Stockholm



**Figure 5**

Porcelain table service produced by Gustavsberg between 1972 and 1984

Photographed by author at Gustavsberg Porcelain Museum at Gustavsberg



**Figure 6 and 7**

The porcelain and glass service designed for 1991 Nobel Dinner by Karin Björquist Gustavsberg AB

Photographed by author at Gustavsberg Porcelain Museum at Gustavsberg



**Figure 8**

The porcelain service designed for 2010 Royal marriage by Gustavsberg AB

Photographed by author at Gustavsberg Porcelain store at Gustavsberg







**Figure 9 and 10**

Porcelain designed by Wilhelm Kåge, produced by Gustavsberg AB from 1917 till 1960

Photographed by author at Gustavsberg Porcelain Museum at Gustavsberg



**Figure 11.**



Left: Master drawing for Rox & Fix. The pattern was first printed by Ljungberg's in 1994.

Right up: Pencil sketch for Rox & Fix.

Right down: Landscape by Shi Tao (1630-1707). Museum of Chengdu, Sichuan, China.

Photograph copied from *Josef Frank—Textile Designs* by Kristina Wängberg-Eriksson published by Bokförlaget Signum I Lund AB, 1999. Pp 109 figure 146-148



**Figure 12.**

Master drawing for Figaro och Tolvekarna from the early 1940s. Figaro, Estrid Ericsson's canary, is depicted on six of the twelve oak trees. At times Figaro was allowed to fly about freely in the Svenskt Tenn shop at Strandvägen in Stockholm.

Photograph copied from *Josef Frank—Textile Designs* by Kristina Wängberg-Eriksson published by Bokförlaget Signum I Lund AB, 1999. Pp 20figure 16.



**Figure 13**

Window display of books and shelf

Photographed by author at Svenskt Tenn store in Stockholm



**Figure 14**

Non Funkis Tenn (Nonfunctional Pewter)

Photographed by author at Svenskt Tenn store in Stockholm



**Figure 14**

Domestic design exhibition *Going Gray* at Svenskt Tenn store in Stockholm February 2010

Designers: Mats Gustafson & Ted Muehling

Photographed by author at Svenskt Tenn store in Stockholm



**Figure 15**

Table decoration

Domestic design exhibition *Going Gray* at Svenskt Tenn store in Stockholm February 2010

Designers: Mats Gustafson & Ted Muehling

Photographed by author at Svenskt Tenn store in Stockholm



Figure 16

Table decoration

Domestic design exhibition *Going Gray* at Svenskt Tenn store in Stockholm February 2010

Designers: Mats Gustafson & Ted Muehling

Photographed by author at Svenskt Tenn store in Stockholm



Figure 17



Communicational material of Swedish design published by the Swedish Institute in August 2005

Lotta Jonson: editor-in-chief of Form, Scandinavia’s biggest design magazine. The author alone is responsible for the opinion expressed in this article.

Translation: Hugh Rodwell



Figure 18

Cover and booklet of *Design in Scandinavia*

The original title is in Chinese called 设计北欧 (translated by author) , written by Chen Yan’an published by Chongqing Press in 2009. It is a book about design and travel in Scandinavia.



## Figure 19

Booklet of Svenskt Tenn exhibition *Going Gray* in February 2009

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2. Pöcelain Exhibition in Gustavsberg Porcelain Museum. (The author of this thesis visited it on February 2010)
3. Domestic design exhibition *Going Grey* held by Svenskt Tenn in its store in Stockholm. (The author of this thesis visited it on February 2010)

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