



Tradition and Innovation in Vegetable Fibres' Design

Commissioner

Gaddo Morpurgo

Exhibition

Tradition and innovation in vegetable fibres' design

Project

Kigali Institute of Science and Technology,
with Università Iuav di Venezia, Soroptimist International, Fondazione Claudio Buziol

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PARTICIPATION OF THE REPUBLIC OF RWANDA

TO THE 12. INTERNATIONAL ARCHITECTURE EXHIBITION - LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA

Tradition and innovation in vegetable fibres' design

MÖBIUS

Atelier Rwanda Workshop

YEGO! A rwandan story directed by Leandro Lisboa

Women call for women by Francis Kéré

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**New jewellery based on Rwanda's
traditional techniques**





The Luxury of the Fibers Alice Cappelli

»In a different network of social relations you can create a different material culture«

Gui Bonsiepe

Craftsmanship is still an alluring profession for man. The work of craftsmen presents itself as a form of communication between man and nature. Every corner of the world holds its own craftsmanship, which is based on the surrounding environment and on locally available raw materials. Through his technique, man dialogues with nature and breathes life into products that have a story to tell. They are the embodiment of creativity, traditions, rites, cultures, and needs, and in their diversity a single material can be variously interpreted and give life to a different shape for each country. The material culture therefore remains a real vehicle of many aspects of the immaterial culture of any population.

Crafts in Rwanda are heavily characterised by the use of natural fibres and to date basket weaving remains their most characteristic material expression with both aesthetical and functional purposes. Their originality can be traced back in time, from practical and artistic products up to the peak expression of local architecture that is given by the *Royal Hut* that encompasses all the art of Rwanda's basketry. Rich with essentially geometric patterns, rich with a wide variety of natural fibres that are worked into various shapes using a range of techniques, it is still made for various purposes and plays a major socioeconomic role. In effects the influence of modernisation, dictated above all by the importation of western civilisation, had a major impact on traditional crafts, which are now confined to the spaces of the rural reality of the Country and taught in training centres, in cooperatives, or in women's associations. These represent the independent and collective local response to further one's own social situation, turning many sectors, including the crafts, into one of the main forms of living and sources of revenue. From this we can understand the importance of cooperatives as the real starting point for the potential creation of updated professional figures based on their traditional manual skills, and holding a constant relation between the place, its history and its identity.

One of Atelier Rwanda's main objectives is to promote what we call a rural economy, starting from locally available human and material resources and with the purpose of innovating and diversifying the crafts. We aim to rediscover its potential not only in social and economic terms, representing its players as the keepers of the Country's distinctive culture and positioning Design as the strategic mediator between material culture and innovation. This project mixes University, Design and the Crafts, testing their potential in a creative process that represents the meeting point between cultures that communicate, create and evolve, strengthening the know-how of the people as well as national identity.

The need for an efficient training system was first identified by focusing attention on the production of basketry, since basket weaving is one of the few traditional activities that is still alive today, along with all its rela-

ve tools and techniques. The Agaseke is perhaps the greatest symbol of one of the most characteristic and representative examples of Rwanda's crafts, culture and society, to the point that it is depicted in the very symbol of the Republic of Rwanda. The idea for jewellery is the result of identifying the need to upgrade and innovate *Ububoshyi bu'uruhindu*, one of the traditional manufacturing methods of the Agaseke, in order to protect the product itself and to safeguard the skills, the energy and the patience that basket weaving and basket makers are capable of expressing in objects that are uniquely refined and detailed. The passage is almost part of the technique itself, where it becomes the crown jewel of an art that is truly representative of its kind, and where the real value lies not in the material itself but rather in the story behind its creation. Craftsmen who over the generations have been handing down traditions, knowledge and material cultures in face of a shortage of market and visibility opportunities for their work, with the ensuing loss of some, push the limits of design and experiment with their techniques in order to assess and update their potential.

After the first field survey in 2008, Atelier Rwanda is carrying out the project in Italy and setting up prototypes for a range of jewellery. The first workshop set up in San Marino sees a team of students and professors that are working together to study techniques and to discover how long threads of defibred *Itaratarata* that is collected into little bundles and sown together can be given new shapes to benefit the body. "The theme proposed to the students was *Nature and Artifice. Rule and Shape*. [...] After identifying a governing rule the students were asked to make jewellery assume the quality, aside from its normal ornamental nature, of configuring and extending space around the body, creating an architecture where the body contributes to give life and meaning".¹

The proposal gave life to many results, all of which were different from the others in terms of experimentation with various techniques and/or shapes but were united by a single objective: enhance such a poor material and draw it into the range of products that carry a high symbolic and commercial value. At first the designs were transformed into prototypes using glue and thread instead of *Uruhindu* and *Intaratarata*, the respective means and natural fibre used in the *Ububoshyi bu'uruhindu* technique. Atelier Rwanda moved to Rwanda for the September 2009 workshop, the first to be carried out on location which allowed us to discover the project's true strength: the direct and reciprocal exchange of skills and knowledge between the craftswomen and the students. Training was offered and based on the skill of the local players, the starting point for the trade of knowledge, that led to specialisation for the craftsmen and a form of cultural enrichment for the students that is unique in its kind. Any issues that we encountered because of cultural differences vanished the moment we understood how skills are finalised in the act of creation and planning. Reciprocal training was achieved with complementary and secondary communication where the rational vision of Designers met the symbolic charge of the craftsmen, bestowing an unparalleled soul to these objects. The prototypes created in San

Marino turned out to be an extremely useful meeting point to debate and illustrate our proposals to the craftswomen. The stage of experimentation that involved everyone and that was carried out to comprehend, detect and solve problems relative to the making of jewellery, gave life to new shapes linked to the technique. Triangles are a glaring example, as are the details of clasps and the relations achieved between the shapes that compose the necklaces. But perhaps the most emotional memories lie in small gestures of the craftswomen, such as the picture made by Annuarite who depicted herself wearing earrings and necklaces reflecting the triangle she was making, or the small prototype made out of threads by Elisabeth in her attempt to understand and make the designs her own through her own handiwork. A new form, which demanded that the craftsman further his knowledge of technique, was instead the result of a joint project that was carried out directly on location by Italian and Rwandese students for the creation of a bracelet named *Möbius*.

The form became emblematic of the project because instead of presenting two separate sides it flowed into a single continuous surface, a symbol of reciprocal contamination made possible by cooperation projects such as Atelier Rwanda. Consequently the search for a conclusion in this project is apparently difficult and mistaken. The type of experimentation that denotes it leaves the door open to a variety of paths, not all of which are one-way. However the recovery and protection of the local identity remains the main challenge to deal with real development in harmony with society and its material culture. Healthy competition grants vitality and competitiveness to local systems with Design as the underlying theme between tradition and modernity, both locally and globally.

One thing is certain: the work of Atelier Rwanda unites the potential of Universities, Design and Crafts and thereby uncovers their importance because of their capability of simultaneously interacting with the material culture and the society, with training and research, as the cultural vehicles to update knowledge and learn to know the other.

¹ Cp. Massimo Brignoni, *Applicazione delle lavorazioni tradizionali, tipo Akaseks K'uruhindu, per prodotti ad alto valore commerciale*, SMUD 5, San Marino Aprile 2009



San Marino, 2008

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Rwanda, 2009

Rwandan Handcraft Women

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Jewellery on Intaratara fibres

»It is really hard to design items of jewellery, such small, terrible objects! Jewellery is part of the body that wears it, becomes part of it, accenting it, isolating it, penetrating it, binding it...«
Alessandro Mendini

Jewellery as part of the body and as the bearer of a story: the meeting of cultures whose dialogue gave life to it. Vegetable fibres as material expression of an almost forgotten luxury: the traditional values of the land. It is for this that jewellery was chosen for the *Atelier Rwanda, research laboratory and innovative design projects in Africa* workshop, where Italian and Rwandan students joined forces with four craftswomen to set up a dialogue and create 7 necklaces and 1 bracelet.

It is part of the activities developed by the scientific cooperation programme set up between the Iuav University of Venice and Kigali's KIST. A training course for young craftswomen on the innovation and diversification of Rwanda's handcrafted products that aims to exploit work based on vegetable fibres to improve local manufacturing skills, strengthening the role and professionalism of the craftswomen themselves. The programme was split up into workshops, with a first stage focused on research, recovery and ideation, and a second stage dedicated to contamination, experimentation and on-site production.

The first workshop was carried out in September of 2008 as part of the Industrial Design degree course held by the University of San Marino. Gabriele Gmeiner and Massimo Brignoni joined Design students to interpret this technique and create a range of jewellery. Gmeiner's group adopted an approach that focused on traditional shapes and their replication in three-dimensional geometrical effects, and Brignoni's group adopted an approach that focused on experimental techniques and their potential. The result of these activities can be seen in the selection of prototypes chosen from an excellent range of designs that emerged dur-

ing the initial freestyle stage, followed by their on-site production. The second workshop that was carried out in September of 2009 brought students and professors to Rwanda where the first training course for craftswomen was being carried out with direct and mutual exchanges between local and European players who were working on the creation of jewellery that was previously and locally idealised, including the Möbius bracelet.

A single fibre, Intaratara marsh grass, and a single tool, Uruhindu, were used to give life to a range of jewellery capable of narrating a singular experience. The natural colour of the fibre is meant to come in contact with the black colour as a symbol of the only thing that differentiates us: skin. The local basket weaving tradition provides that the colours black (Ibyiro) and red (Itaka) characterise handcrafted items insofar as made out of natural materials such as coal and earth. In both cases they would be mixed with banana resin and applied directly to the fibre. Today pre-mixed powders have replaced these items and paved the way to a large variety of colours, but it is always the same craftsmen that take care of dying this fibre. Soaking Intaratara in coloured water, covering it with banana leaves and then drying it under the sun remains one of the fundamental passages in the creation of these items of jewellery, and as such it fascinated both students and professors. Another aspect of daily life was needed to complete the final picture capable of representing one of the traditional professions that is still alive today, complete with its relative techniques and tools: the production of basketry. Atelier Rwanda therefore benefited from living in direct contact with the local reality, which it observed, stored and classified in order to then conceive, experiment, create and bring over to Italy a wealth of knowledge that tells the story of an encounter that is embodied in the subtlety and elegance of these items of jewellery.



















Iuav Master Degree in Product Design

Graduation thesis for Academic Year 2008/2009

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Topic
Updating Rwanda's crafts

Sharing Design, Updating Rwanda's crafts

This research dissertation focuses on Design's strategic role in determining internationalisation actions and activities. Such actions and activities steer away from traditional processes to identify and set up innovative and socially sustainable growth processes in developing Countries. The work presented in this dissertation is the result of an international cooperation project between Italy and Rwanda, whose general purpose is to promote the Country's economic development. Implementation of the project provides for the recovery and reclassification of the local arts and crafts and cultural heritage, and furthering the growth and professionalism of craftsmen. The partnership set up by the project benefited from the cooperation of Genoa's 'Bottega Solidale' (Solidarity Workshop) and the Copabu crafts cooperative in Butare, Rwanda. Work on location focused on finding a solution to the need to innovate traditional handcrafted products in order to make them more suitable for placement in the current context and to make them competitive on both local and international markets. This is a form of micro-intervention based on the direct involvement of the beneficiaries and on a bottom-up logic that identifies the need for intervention by first looking at local needs and skills.

The first stage of research highlighted the importance of the local crafts cooperatives that were set up to meet the demands of the community itself in the various local environments, most of which are rural. They represent a form of support for entire families, but are also an expression of a policy of reconciliation and unity for the survivors of the genocide who need to regroup and overcome daily troubles, and can do so through these associations. From this we can understand the importance of handcrafted products as a source of revenue for many people, the true starting point for the potential creation of renewed professional figures based on their traditional manual skills. Research and experimentation carried out during the trip to Rwanda from February to March of 2009 characterises the submitted projects, which can in-

dividually be defined as 'seed projects'. Their peculiarity lies in the ability to allow craftsmen to express themselves freely. The experimental stage thus led to the creation of prototypes in close cooperation with the craftsmen, and the definition of four potential paths to follow:

1. Formal and functional innovation of handcrafted products and handicraft techniques with the purpose of increasing, through the project action, the innovative potential of handcrafted products;
2. Contamination between materials in order to bring various skills together in a dynamic and creative matter in order to innovate products and broaden their market;
3. Experimentation with different techniques and transfer of the same to other types of products in order to create a relational system between the various local and international handicraft productions and to highlight the lack of suitable tools;
4. Identification of work processes in order to create a system in the community itself and between the various local handicraft productions that would strengthen and raise the value of the same.

These four methods of intervention represent potential guidelines that designers may choose to follow, independently or together, in the course of international cooperation projects. By working in this manner designers will be able to recognise the cultural values of the community in the global context and will become the promoters of a new form of socio-economic development. The type of research and experimentation that distinguishes this project leaves the door wide open to a variety of bidirectional paths. Their organisation can become the conclusion itself, insofar as work carried out on location allowed us to come into direct contact with the local reality and the issues that have to be dealt with in order to allow for real and independent development. The prerequisite conditions for this to happen entail that these people must be made aware of their capabilities, and of the countless opportunities that can follow. This can be a starting point for the community and could be the objective of any internation-

al cooperation project set up in stages capable of achieving a specific target. The first step is the consolidation of knowledge, through training courses, in order to deliver excellent techniques and products. This is followed by the intervention of Design through forms of cooperation that include innovative processes and mechanisms capable of triggering the response of craftsmen who can revisit the past using present cultural and aesthetical trends. The importance of the second step lies in the possibility of involving, to the greatest possible extent, other representative exponents of the land such as students and universities to set up new cooperation methods on location.

Introducing a change in the use of materials enhances skills and tradition and leads us to the third step: the notion of system within the community. Enhancing the competitiveness of a product by exploiting new potential uses for known materials by exploiting their aesthetic and functional peculiarities as well as the systems and criteria employed to create the item allows us to introduce the notion of chain production that involves the cooperation of different crafts.

By this stage craftsmen should feel like they are a part of the community that they helped to create. Consequently the work of craftsmen, which plays an integral and definitive role in the independent development of a country, can be reassessed not only as a source of revenue to elevate one's lifestyle, but also as a true and proper profession capable of elevating man. Currently the work of craftsmen is not considered as a profession with a rich history, but simply an activity that is associated to the poverty of rural areas. The intervention of Design to enhance the value of products also aims to enhance the value of craftsmen as part of the economy and the society. The next step can see the birth of real manufacturing establishments that offer professional training, practical workshops for the new generations. The community also benefits from the training of apprentices who are eager to gain a status for themselves. The presence of countless cooperatives can be viewed as a good starting point for the dissemination

of knowledge together with manual and technical skills, and result in specialised craftsmen. This Design project examines these potential scenarios in a non-invasive manner, developing ideas based on a joint research approach. Resources interact in the creation of a competitive identity which is turned into a strategy for local development not by making but rather by digging into the culture and history of the society, bringing it closer to a global market with an emphasis on the identity and vision that characterise the place itself.

Many believe that these projects are new forms of colonisation, but if anything this project is a form of mutual colonisation, where cultures meet and local does not object to global, but rather enriches it with a real dialogue between different cultures, trading and comparing without losing its own specific properties. In this global age we should try to use the manufacturing economy as a cultural vehicle capable of making different people meet and break down the walls of ignorance that lead to fear. Products will be distinguished from others because of their search for a cultural elite which is no longer tied to the economic possibilities of a person but rather to the person's will to see and embrace change. Updated crafts to produce items made precious not by their luxury but by their intrinsic message. Munari loved to say that revolutions should happen without anyone noticing, and the creation of these international knowledge networks could be a fitting example of this.

We could see the various societies of this earth as trees whose roots support the trunk, representative of the country, which grow along with its various ramifications. The pruning carried out by external interventions must not prevent the tree from developing or bend it to a desired shape, but should instead help to set it on the right path. Strengthen it. After that it will grow by itself, feeding on the soil and taking the shape that suits it best in an independent manner.

"ALBERO l'esplosione lentissima di un seme"
Bruno Munari, "fenomeni bifronti", 1993





Atelier Rwanda Tradition and innovation in vegetable fibres’ design
curated by Alice Cappelli and Gaddo Morpurgo

Atelier Rwanda is a multi-year project, which consists of a series of workshops made in Kigali (Rwanda), realized thanks to the combined efforts of the Kigali Institute of Science and Technology, the Iuav University of Venice, the Fondazione Claudio Buziol of Venice, Soroptimist International and with the scientific collaboration and the contribution of Favero & Milan engineering

Web reference
atelierwanda.wordpress.com

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