

SEARCH FOR NEW AESTHETICS IN BAMBOO CRAFT.

a g rao

This paper was presented in a seminar in Bengaluru on Bamboo in 1997

Abstract

Product Aesthetics plays a significant role in the acceptance of Bamboo Craft. Traditional bamboo craft in its native, settings and natural contexts had reached high aesthetics standards. The craft was an expression of unconscious creativity of a crafts person living harmoniously, with dignity, absorbed deeply in his / her occupation. Excellent products from the rural North east of India stand as an example. In other parts of India the excellence in the craft was limited by the low status given to bamboo as a materials as well as to the craftsman in the society. Bamboo products were seen as 'cheap products' made by lower casts. The aesthetics of simplicity in the folk craft was seldom valued by the rich in the society. In contrast, Bamboo craft excelled in Japan, triggered by the import of fine bamboo work from China. It got recognized as an art-form', some of the baskets reaching prestigious museums.

In India the inevitable compulsions of commercialization due to industrial growth, further brought in aesthetic degeneration in bamboo craft. Attempts to make objects of utility in bamboo craft to suit modern life has put enormous pressure on the aesthetics demands of bamboo craft. The inevitable imitation of production forms in other materials like wood, metal and plastics has been a further impediment to the craft.

The crisis of articulating aesthetics of bamboo craft' in to-day's context is faced by the traditional craftsman who is unexposed to industrial Arts, as well as the industrial designer who has little understanding of bamboo craft.

In this paper, an attempt is made to analyse the aesthetics of traditional bamboo crafted product in terms of form, structure relationships as well as detailing and finishes. Its place with respect to the aesthetic trends of modern movement are

discussed. Features of post modernism and movements like Memphis are examined with visual examples, to reach indicators for new aesthetics in Bamboo craft.

Product aesthetics plays a significant role in the acceptance of bamboo craft in the present day lives. Looking at crafts in general the crafted objects have been objects of skill, pieces of rarity and full of ornamentation. They have reached the status of 'Art,' whenever they were exclusive. The high status for 'Craft' as an 'Art piece' centres on its rarity, exclusiveness and the quality in terms of beauty. The highly ornamented crafts, with expensive materials and enormous labour continue to be treated as 'Art objects', created by unknown Artists.

The second category of crafts is the folk crafts, to which 'Bamboo craft' belongs. Objects of folk crafts have been simple and functional. The forms have originated for a functional purpose, governed by the nature of materials and the process. If we take a closer look. The 'forms' are sophisticated, are out come of mastery of technique and thorough understanding of the material. India has rich tradition of such highly developed bamboo craft in the North East parts of the country, brought to focus by the excellent documentation by National Institute of Design (Ranjan et al, 1986) in the recent times. These products of bamboo craft, have well treated details integrated rims, legs and joints. The aesthetics has evolved with optimization taking place, suitable for functions in those particular regions.

Bamboo craft has taken two directions in aesthetics in the past. In china and Japan it become more and more decorative. It reached high quality with several innovations in basketry. It was akin to a folk music becoming classical music. The bamboo crafted pieces have reached. Art museums in Japan. The craft treated as variety of forms, textures and excellent finishes. The objects have been no more mere object of utility. They were used for entertaining guests on special occasions. The aesthetic details were talked about in an affluent social gathering.

The other direction can be seen in the context of Industrial Revolutions on the line of mass production. Let us see how industrialization has affected the scene. With machine production taking over the hand made product, mass manufactured goods

have become part of our life. The aesthetics of mass produced goods also have been characterized by simplicity in overall forms, sophisticated details and variety of finishes. The 'functions' of a modern object includes the functions of distributions and marketing. Aesthetics have been governed by, not only one time use but also prolonged usage. Factors like compactness, product communication (semantics) advertising safety, production economy and satisfaction of emotional needs of the user, etc all play a part in today's product aesthetics.

The second route for bamboo craft is that of industrialization in the above context. The aesthetics here is out come of the same forces that governed the mass produced object. Division of craft labour, standardization of elements, later assembly of elements to achieve production economy, combing with other materials like metal and plastic where the functions demands, etc are the inevitable features of industrialisaiton.

The good examples in Bamboo Craft of this kind are products from 'Adi crafts.' Unfortunately we encounter, the undesirable inevitable forces of industrialization in this process. Craftsmen become specialized in doing specific parts. Production efficiency demands division of labour, which eventually creates classes like more hard working labourer, skilled labourer doing critical parts and the creative labourer or designer. The aesthetic itself is dictated by factors like economy of production. Economy of transportation etc.

At this juncture let us take look at the 'aesthetic scene' of current industrial product itself. Inevitable lack of variety in the globally mass produced items and affluence where 'economy' and 'comfort' can take a second role has led to new trends in aesthetics, generally termed as post modernism.

The aesthetic tenets of post modernism have opened new avenues for creativity. The earlier order, signified by symmetry is elegantly destroyed. A surprise substitution of another visual element elevates the product into an 'Art object'. Visual elements like prints and printed textures are used to surprising effect. A daily visual elements like prints and printed textures are used to surprising effect. A daily used product like a book shelf becomes an object of importance as the semantics dominate utility. Organic forms mix with industrial forms without inhibitions. A 'tray' has 'hands' which look like human hands. A surrealistic

element is added when strange substitutions and vibrant colours transform the daily used product. The product aesthetics reminds us that the products are not mere commodities but have their own personality and soul (if I have to use a stronger expression). Symbolic elements are used to convey deeper meanings.

My hypothesis in this paper is that. The stage is set for bamboo craft for new aesthetic experimentation. The craft needs to get out of the shackles of conformistic imitative forms in the name of functionality. The mere limitations of feature of mass produced objects can take the craft only to the level of mass produced plastic product in terms of aesthetics. Today, well set industrial product has a difficulty to adopt post modern trends in aesthetics, especially in developing countries due to high tool costs and limited market span. Craft based products have an advantage in this respect.

It is time that Bamboo craft takes this new route, via post modernism towards an art form. It can by pass the imitative route of industrial aesthetics. Bamboo craft ought to use other material like brass, copper, silver, jute textiles in combination. It can also use the other craft techniques to achieve a new aesthetics which can be bold and assertive.

New meanings with symbology from Indian tradition can make it rich and exclusive. This would also mean a new relationship between the craftsman and the designer. A new equation between the worker and intellectual each becoming the other, when necessary, needs to evolve to see a bright future for bamboo craft.

Bibliography



1. Kenji Kaneko, 1985. The History of Bamboo Craft to pre-modern times. In craft Catalogue, the National Museum of Moder Art, Tokyo.
2. Michael Collins and Andreas Papa dakis, 1989, post-modern desing. Rizzoli international Publications. Inc., New York, NY 10010.
3. M.P. Ranjan (et al), Bamboo and Cane Crafts of North East India, 1985, National Institute of Design , Ahmedabad.
4. Rao A.G. 1995. Design Inputs into Craft Area, Implications for rural Development and Employment Generation – Presented in international congress and Workshop held at Bali (Indonesia).
5. Toshiko. M.Mc Callum, 1988, Containing Beauty, UCLA Museum of Cultural History U.S.