Design with Linnaeus’ colours (oral)

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1. Abstract

The aim of this research is to individuate a design product or service application to create a territorial specificity, using the reference of a colour palette with historical and geographical values, picked out in the spirit of Linnaeus, the Swedish botanist, and characteristic of the Öland island, in Sweden. It equally wants to highlight the design process as a possible methodology for product and service development enhancing territorial value.

2. Introduction: background and foreground of colour range application as design identity key

The research is carried out in Sweden that already has, in this field, a well-known historical precedent, in fact the colour range set in the Gustavian period, which dates back into the 18th century. Furniture from the Gustavian period was characterized by very recognizable hues such as off-white, creamy yellow, peppermint green, pale grey, and blue with the addition of gold in the mansions, moreover other important details that connote this style are the light finishes almost without sheen. This style followed the Swedish Rococo and was due to king Carl Gustav III, who returned from an European tour smitten with the Neoclassical furniture as well as being impressed by the interiors of the French Versailles Palace he had visited. When back at home, he adapted the European style to the Scandinavian simple lines and soft colours in his manors. The country readily embraced the new interior ideas and reinterpreted them in local woods and inexpensive finishes, and, in typical Swedish fashion, the excesses of the French court were decidedly toned down. The original finishes that contributed in a far extent to the elegant atmosphere feeling, were attained by multiple layers of a pigment such as black Iron Oxide, which were mixed with linseed oil, a traditional means of finish. The new style became enormously popular and was the forerunner of the laid-back simplicity associated with the Scandinavian interior design style, prone until nowadays to maximize light, and shows us the great role played not only by shapes but as well by a colour map in giving a regional identity and in this particular case, also in a huge national scale[1].

Ikea, the furniture company, launched a collection in this style some years ago, which has now been acquired by another Swedish company Move, riding the still widespread popularity of this kind of furniture that is alimenting the international antiquity trade.

Having this cultural case-history in the background, it was thought to carry out, inside a larger research on Linnaeus, a section dedicated to the work of the botanist, creating a colour map to be eventually used in design or brand products relating to a particular area of the country with a very special flora and history, exploring the possibilities of using and caring for local resources to produce an economical return.
Fig. 1 – Panoramic of Gustavian style.

Fig. 2 – Colour palettes in Henriette Koblinck’s room at Linnaeus University.
Methods and Development

The first phase is referred to the results of the pre-existing research, aimed at the creation of a colour map of the island Öland, which through Linnaeus’ botanical observations would reproduce the chromatic hues characteristic of the island [5].
The research of Linnaeus’ Öland colour scale had as intent to develop a regional identity starting from colour.

Carl Nilsson Linnaeus (Rashult, May 23, 1707 – Uppsala, January 10, 1778), -- turned Carl von Linné after his ennoblement and renowned to most people simply as Linnaeus, from the Latinized form of the name Carolus Linnaeus, was a biologist, a doctor and a writer, and is today considered the father of modern scientific classification. Linnaeus travelled to the two major Swedish islands, Öland and Gotland, on behalf of the government, in 1741, having as a mission to locate the raw materials in Sweden that could replace the imported ones. Thus the purpose of his trip was to find herbs, plants and flowers, from which produce colours to be employed in the textile industry. In 1745, Linnaeus published his observations on the trip in Carl Linnaei Öländska och Gothländska Resa.

Öland is a long and narrow island located on the Baltic Sea connected to the mainland through a bridge. The island features a peculiar flora, mainly a wide variety of orchids and other rare plants.

Traditionally the design work is not a theoretical issue but has its roots in the handicraft which was refined and developed into what is called arts and crafts, which in turn was the origin of the successful Swedish Arts industry. Therefore the methodology of this research is based on direct experimentation.

The results of the research conducted as a first step to a colour map, drawn from the selection of plants – Woad, Dyer’s Woodruff, Buckthorn, Devil’s-bit scabious, Stone lichen, - observed by the botanist and based on the dyeings carried out on wool. It included a wide chromatic range: red, blue, green and brown in different shades, ranging up to yellow, all recalling the local colour signs found both in nature and in the villages, therefore representative of the island of Öland.

Then a second step provided a selection of these colours that was sorted out in order to obtain a number of colours, which, expressing both the modern and historical territorial identity, could be employed in the current industrial production, displaying a valid language abreast of our times[2] [3].

The colours, in a third step, were then translated in the NCS, Natural Color System, through the carrying out of many tests and experiments so that the results could be employed in the industrial production. Further information on these steps are described in “I Linnés fotspår på Öland”, ed. By E. Idemark and in “In search of Linnaeus’ colours” by H. Koblanck and M. Moro.

The final palette, formed by 5 colour groups of different shades, was designed on the possibility of matching basic colours with one or two contrast colours.

Among the designers who participated on the first project and who started from this idea of matching basic and contrast colours were Susanne Idling and Anna Harblom [4]. They worked in a graphical way, elaborating decorative motifs, which may be applied on textiles or wall-papers. The colours chosen were thought to be utilized not only on different product typologies, such as industrial products, packaging and furniture, but also on an architectural scale, on building facades and on wider areas in shape of territorial signs.

This part of the research referring to the architectural scale is ongoing and not yet concluded. In effect, the main applications wished for were connected to the marketing and promotion of the island, in manner to create a sort of brand for a
geographical place, and consequently also to the distribution of local products recognizable by colour range.

Two students of the Industrial Design degree course at Kalmar University now Linnaeus University, Lina Stjernquist [5] and Charlotte Björned, have discussed their thesis on Linnaeus’ colour scale, with the objective of creating home furnishing collections. They wanted to experience the ancient production methods, used in Sweden in the Eighteen century during Linnaeus lifetime, in the execution of their final project, such as the printing of decorative motifs, the use of the loom and the knitting. Furthermore, they got their inspiration directly from the colouring plants on the chromatic scale to elaborate the decorative motifs, which can be reproduce not only on textiles but also on objects and furnishings. The vision is to create a modern interior design collection on the basis of Linnaeus Öland colors that radiate Swedish identity and tradition.

4. Conclusion

The research work and especially the palette possible applications are still under investigation, constantly involving the contribution of the Industrial Design course’s students of the Linnaeus University, who bring new inputs to the research itself.

To get to the next step a theme “How do we relate at the regional level, what is the link between colour and identity” has been chosen.

The main focus is to individuate where to apply the colour ranges to create a territorial identity in order to use and add market value to local resources, further to create full scale functional prototypes and therefore workshops has been made.

Bibliography