On the outskirts

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On the Outskirts

Geography of design and the self-exoticisation of Danish design

Original article, words

A recurring theme of debates on Danish design throughout the 20th century is that it was largely uninfluenced by international trends or -isms and that its modern qualities were instead due to timeless virtues originating from national traditions of simple functionality and crafts-based refinement. This kind of nationalist and protectionist rhetoric has been observed in many countries, despite obvious international exchanges. However, Denmark exhibits a rich case of such a contradictory discourse, and this article presents examples from 1900 until now. Where recent research on Danish design has focused on a historiographical critique of the myth-making that was used to promote Danish design to foreign audiences, this article traces the long line of Danish discussions that made designers and critics believe in the myth of Denmark as an exception to the impact of industrialisation and commercialisation.

This discourse on independence and inherent qualities runs contrary to the general historical developments in the geography of design. It seems, however, to mirror the way in which the very proximity of Germany as an industrial superpower around 1900 caused Danes to erect mental borders and focus narrowly on small, cultural differences, not on the actual industrialisation going on in Denmark. As Danish Modern became an international success in the 1950s – based on industrial design and furniture – this discourse was manifested clearly as self-exoticisation, insisting on strong ties to traditions, crafts and the cultural history of Denmark. And it seems to remain active, repeating some of the same counter-factual ideas in both marketing and debates today.
It is said of the Danes that they are a friendly, unpretentious people and as the people are, so are the artists; only the exceptional among them succeed in breaking away from their generation and their milieu. This probably explains why the Danes never formed the vanguard of a new artistic trend. Denmark lies on the edge of Europe far from the source of the great movements, not only geographically but also culturally.1

Seen in the global, geographical perspective of international design history, Denmark has been close to the European centres of development, Great Britain, France and Germany, from the 19th century and on. And the obvious foreign influences on Danish design are numerous. But among Danish commentators, designers, critics and historians, it has been a recurring and very persistent theme that Danish design was a special case with its own strong traditions and independent developments.2 As a small country with few resources in the midst of forceful, international developments these reactions were national protectionism expressed as a moral scepticism towards commercialisation as ephemeral fashion and loss of traditional values. What may have started around 1900 as an anxiety towards close neighbour, Germany, with its late but rapid industrialisation, was addressed later in the 1920s and repeatedly in the 1950s as ‘Americanization’, as dissolution of cultural cohesion. This critical view was shared even by avant-garde designers and has produced rhetorical topos in design and architecture institutions on geography and self-exoticisation that live on.

The epigraph is a quote by two architects, Arne Karlsen, later vice-chancellor and professor of furniture, and Anker Tiedemann, later chief editor of Bo Bedre, the leading interior design magazine. Their book, Made in Denmark, 1960, popularised Danish Design among foreign audiences, but the authors believed that Denmark was a special case of tempered industrialisation, preserving sound traditions and safeguarding values of craftsmanship, materiality and usability. As
architects they were taught that they were the bearers of craftsmanship, even when creating pure industrial design. They were embedded firmly in a moral, vocational self-fashioning discourse, which this article traces through its developments in domestic debates from 1900 and onwards. And it shows how the central critics and designers could believe in the values behind the image of Danish design culture that was later reproduced by the exhibitions and books of the 50s and 60s for foreign audiences. This self-exoticisation of Danish design began very early and was for long periods a domestic discourse building up tradition and shaping the profession. But it was later shaped and amplified by interest in nation-branding and the wishful American picture of unspoiled cultures of the Old World.

There has been research into the foreign reception of the Nordic countries at international exhibitions, see especially Ingeborg Glambek, but little systematic research on the reverse Danish reception has been done, which may reflect the dominance of the protectionist discourse. Like Glambek, I have found my examples in both design and architecture, not least because architects played a dominant role in forming this discourse. I want to contribute here by focussing on specific, rhetorical topoi, the reoccurring reflexions on cultural and geographical conditions and the self-exoticisation that makes ups the inner logic of the discourse on independence and inherent qualities.

In studies of Danish Modern Furniture, the historiographical critique has cut deeply into the myths of uniquely Danish ideals. Based on studies of the British Finmar retailer and Danish furniture producers and designers, Kevin Davies initially pointed out the ‘intelligent promotion’, the marketing that told the story of the special crafts-based, but also functionalist, and in that sense modern, tradition. The chairs alone could hardly tell this story, and their design could only signify these special ideals as part of a much broader discourse.
On the one hand this provides a useful illustration of my earlier and related point about the way discourse of Danish furniture design was used as a sales discourse – in this case the adaption of tradition by modernity, by the slow and thoughtful modification of modernity, by the slow and thoughtful modification of ‘timeless types’. On the other, it clearly shows the elaborate and involved way that Danish furniture was promoted as furniture with a history and with an intellectual programme [...] 

The persistent idea of Danish design presented as a special route to modernity, preserving tradition, was based on the teaching of Kaare Klint and on a special alliance between Copenhagen cabinetmakers and young, functionalist architects that extended their engagement with wood and crafts-based experiments. These elements – the Klint School and the Guild of Cabinetmakers’ Exhibitions – formed the narrative that was told throughout the golden years of Danish Modern. But as business historian Per H. Hansen has pointed out in his thorough investigation of the Danish furniture branch networks, the designers and the furniture that enjoyed success in the 1950s were less dependent on Klint, and crafts production played no more than a rapidly diminishing role. The majority of furniture by Hans J. Wegner, Finn Juhl, Arne Jacobsen and Poul Kjærholm that was exported globally was industrially produced and designed to meet the needs and wishes of an international audience.

[Fig. 1 *Ant Chair* by Arne Jacobsen, 1952, and *Faaborg Chair* by Kaare Klint & Carl Petersen, 1915, Photo by the author. The chair for Faaborg Museum is often presented as the first Danish modern furniture classic and the link from the artists’ furniture and cabinetmaker tradition of 19th century to later Danish Furniture Art, e.g. the *Ant.*]

What Hansen describes as ‘the narrative of Danish Modern furniture’ is certainly a central part of the contradictory discourse on the independence and inherent qualities, and its international impact explains why the discourse has been so long-lived. But I would like to add a wider and more longitudinal study of this specific discourse and focus on its topicalities. Hansen and
Davies have delved into the functionalist ideals and the paradoxical invention of a relation to national crafts traditions, but the theme is older and wider and contains more aspects to explain why it has been so stubbornly repeated. It is certainly constructed as part of the imagined communities and invented traditions forming national identity Hansen mentions, and I return to some of his central examples and sources.

Earlier Danish crafts traditions were a reference point of the later Klint School story, and notably Mirjam Gelfer-Jørgensen has presented the links to the rich heritage of artists' furniture and the Historicist cabinetmakers in Denmark. But both the artists and the journeymen were quite internationally oriented, so this tradition does not in itself explain why architects and designers adopted this protectionist discourse. This only begins around 1900, and the investigations by Gelfer-Jørgensen on Japonism in Denmark might lead to some explanations.

To discuss the role of this Danish theme in an international perspective, I will present theses on the Geography of Design, as Anna Calvera has elaborated them from the first gatherings of the International Committee of Design History and Studies. A global history of design often follows the general currents of economic development, industrialisation and ‘westernisation’ that draws a map of developments spreading from Europe and North America. But the Danish reactions perform as counter-narratives to this general, international perspective and use counter-geographical, and even counter-historical, arguments to depict Denmark as an exception. This Danish discourse of independence emphasises small regional differences and a slower pace of progression, so that a lesser degree of modernisation is thought as equal to a vigorous tradition. This produces the self-exoticisation in which Denmark is supposed to have preserved inherent cultural values long since lost or never achieved elsewhere.

Scandinavian Modern Design of the 1950s was generally exhibited and commented on as both modern and a kind of Old World exotica from the far north. In his investigation into the writings leading up to and presenting the travelling exhibition, Design in Scandinavia, 1954-57, Jørn
Guldberg has pointed out how the US writers proposing the show sketched the picture of Scandinavia as a remote corner of the world with a preserved cultural integrity and harmony. As part of a wider cultural critique of US consumer society, they praise Scandinavian design objects as bearers of human, moral and democratic values, and Guldberg interprets this as a construction of otherness. ‘Only one ‘irregularity’ seems to arise from the case in question in comparison to the case of Said’ian ‘Orientalism’. The difference is that the Scandinavians themselves provided much of the ‘stuffing’ of the discourse of ‘Scandinavian Design’.

‘The Scandinavian organizers contributed to the wishful image, and this is what I understand as self-exoticisation. My article looks into the historical origins of this ‘stuffing’ and will limit its investigations to the Danish discourse on independence, which developed out of specific national and geographical arguments. The logics of self-exoticisation, though, would be comparable in the other Nordic countries, as well as other regions of Europe.

Hansen has looked further into a great variety of Danish and US sources and even shown how Danish official promotion from the 1950s addressed to US tourists visiting Denmark produced a correspondingly exotic picture of hard working, cautious, but happy and welcoming Danes, so that the furniture and the nation could be said to be co-branding each other. I will stick to the discourses of design, though, and follow the long, continuous line of ideas of Danish design as independent and unaffected, and discuss how it developed historically, according to internal and external conjunctures.

Geography of Design
In the historiography of design, the interpretation of long-term developments has since Nicolaus Pevsner been based on a view of basic schemes of industrialisation and modernity as irreversible, unidirectional processes. This fits both with the hegemonic modernist definition of modern design as mass-produced and consumed items following the gradual development of industry and technology, and with the modern science of history exploring economics and technology as the most fundamental
and powerful currents. But it does not fit as easily to an understanding of developments in countries outside the western world, where the consumption of modern design and the design professions were introduced without reaching a ‘sufficient’ level of industrialisation. And different parts of Europe were out of sync as well. Denise Whitehouse introduces this discussion as a power play produced by a definition of design appropriate to the grand narrative. ‘This power play reaches further into design history’s agreed definition of design as the product of industrialization, technological innovation, and mass manufacture, which excludes countries that lack mass manufacturing and its technologies but that nevertheless shape sophisticated design cultures.’

You cannot measure different countries or regions solely according to stages of the grand scheme, but must acknowledge different design cultures with diverging elements.

Anna Calvera has focused on the ‘construction of regional narratives’; on how design historians work with local, national and regional histories that on the one hand may diverge from a global scheme, but on the other hand are part of the development and should be considered in our understanding of global design. She wants us to navigate in these relations of differences and parallels by mapping Geography of Design and work with exchange between local and global perspectives. My Danish perspective, though, differs from Calvera, in that she writes for the critically informed historian constructing new narratives, perhaps even untold stories. I look at an established narrative, but want to discuss it in perspectives of the Geography of Design.

As a small country with few natural resources, Denmark never developed very large industrial companies compared to the centres of international modernism in France and Germany. From a global perspective, however, it is misleading to talk of Denmark as entirely lacking in industrialisation. It is crucial to make close comparisons of different countries – of how receptions and discussions unfolded specifically and how industries, institutions and organisations settled locally. ‘If history were to be organized geographically, the larger narrative could emerge through the comparison of particular situations placed on a map drawn as a network. For the time being the
comparative method is revealing itself as an important instrument to deal with different histories placed on an all-embracing map.” With this presentation of Danish examples I invite comparisons with similar discussions in other countries. In the international perspective it is also important to state that the counter-narratives do not contradict or falsify the general scheme of historical development or global geography of design, but add layers to an understanding of the cultural Geography of Design in showing how narratives and historical discourses can unfold in local oppositions.

Geography plays a distinguishing role, even among the Nordic countries, spatially as well as mentally. While in the old days the travel routes from the other Nordic countries made Copenhagen their bridgehead to the European continent, Danes have at some points seen their role as being a dike or bulwark against the tides of arbitrary fashions or uncultivated modernity from south. Some reasons for this lie, of course, in differences in geo-political position. The situations of Finland and Denmark have been very different, for example. For Finnish designers it has been important to stress their relations to European cultures counter weighting the influence from their mighty Russian neighbour, while Danish designers underlined their independence of German centres despite close encounters. A book from 1994 by the Danish architect Povl Abrahamsen touches on this mental view of the continental connection with reference to factual geography. ‘A 76-kilometre-long border divides Germany from Denmark. It has been mentioned that we are regarded – by the others of the North – as especially continental. This is a claim that is questionable, if we take the engagement of Sweden in European activities from 1600 to 1800 into consideration.” This shaky argument of a relatively short border to continental Europe, presenting a limit to influence, points rather to the mental fact that the very border and the actual closeness to Germany can be viewed both as a link and an obstacle. The point of this article is to demonstrate and discuss how a Danish discourse on design tradition erects purely mental borders and negotiates the possible impulses and exchanges. That the very proximity of Germany and its rapid economic and social development in
Immunity to style

I will go chronologically through examples of the discourse on Danish design from 1900 until the present that argue that Danish design has developed out of its own special tradition, its own design culture, despite foreign influences, to explore this enduring discourse of self-exoticisation. At the Paris Exposition Universelle in 1900 the Museum of Decorative Arts (now Design Museum Denmark) in Copenhagen acquired many items for its fairly new collections. Nevertheless, the librarian and later director of the museum, art historian Emil Hannover wrote on the international ‘rise of the new style’, and how Denmark related and reacted to it, in his thirty page review of the exhibition in the Danish Journal of Industry. He recounted how the style had spread from Great Britain over the Netherlands to France and Germany as a tidal wave. It threatened to flood Denmark, but Hannover believed that Danish arts and crafts were so sound and grounded in a no-nonsense tradition that they would prove immune to short-lived fads. Across the continent the new style had risen to a movement, but this did not exist in Denmark: “There is in Denmark no common effort showing up in direction of style; the new style has until this day not gained any foothold in our country and will hardly be able to do so in the future.” The reasons, he stated for this, lay in the character of ‘inner truth and genuineness’ and a strong interest in artistic personality that resisted copying trends. This was, of course, far from the truth, if we look at the actual designs around 1900.

The critique of Art Nouveau for having become fickle fashion was known elsewhere, but Hannover went very far in claiming Danish arts and crafts to be free from any style at all. This was radical in the years where speculations on the notion of style were so productive for art history and modern designers.” In Denmark the notions of Art Nouveau or Jugendstil were mostly mentioned as critique of foreign fashions in design and architecture, despite the fact that the style movement initially
led to the revitalisation of craft traditions. As late as 1907 the Danish term ‘Skønvirke’ was introduced to signify the new direction that had already been clear from around 1890 among Danish artists. And the word in its literal meaning, ‘work of beauty’, refers rather to the activity of arts and crafts rather than style. There was an exchange between Art Nouveau as international idiom and regional revivalisms claimed as demonstrations of more authentic styles, but in most cases, as with the Finnish Karelian style that was so highly praised at the 1900 exhibition, it was understood as a productive exchange. Perhaps the younger nations of Finland and Norway tried to seize the moment through style, where Danish designers wanted to arrest time by their attempts at style-less design. ‘Timelessness’ became the Danish refrain as the notion of style faded in the debates of the modernists.

[Fig. 2 Furniture for a study by Arne Jacobsen & Flemming Lassen, The Cabinetmakers’ Guild Exhibition 1932, from G. Jalk (ed.) 40 Years of Danish Furniture Design vol. 1, Teknologisk Instituts forlag 1987]

The Danish reception of the international modern movement in the late 1920s continued to express some of the same reservations. The above mentioned Kaare Klint, who founded the school of furniture art at the Royal Academy of Art in Copenhagen in 1924, took the Bauhaus-ideas as confirmation of his own work that stripped traditional types of furniture and proportioned them according to the measures of the human body and standard utensils. However, his ideas of honest construction and quality were only practised in crafts-based wooden furniture, and he wrote, in fact, quite little to explain the relation to tradition that became the endlessly repeated story of the Klint School. In Per H. Hansen’s tracing of the narrative of Klint and the Copenhagen cabinetmakers as founders of the Danish tradition of furniture art he points to a broader network of young architects, critics, organizers and furniture professionals who produced the discourse through catalogues and
reviews. A striking example of an attempt to define and discipline the right understanding of Danish values, he stresses, is the review of furniture by the young Arne Jacobsen and Flemming Lassen at the Cabinetmakers’ Guild Exhibition in 1932. ‘If their aim was to make a splash, they have probably succeeded, but apart from that they have gained nothing. The only result is that the general public and some of the cabinetmakers have received the impression that this is what is really modern, and that this is what we young architects want to achieve.’ These white cubic masses in cellulose-treated upholstery were decried as a false kind of modernism and certainly not representative of any Danish mode of form-giving, being rather reproductions of ‘German errors’. Such writings defined and confirmed the understanding of Danish values whose expression lay in clear wooden constructions, and Jacobsen never returned to the Cabinetmakers’ Exhibitions.

Another modern Danish designer, Poul Henningsen, was more articulate on the role of tradition. He won rapid, international fame for his lamps produced by Louis Poulsen, and he had more progressive thoughts on the means of mass production. In his critical writings, though, he discussed how Le Corbusier and Bauhaus aesthetically went too far and turned steel tubes, flat roofs and glass walls into an exaggerated demonstration of a new idiom beyond functional justification. In Tradition and Modernism from 1927 he states that a radical modernist creating a new style ex nihilo is just as far off as the traditionalist reproducing dead forms in conflict with modern ways of living. Both are out of contact with a living, historical development. ‘The important part of the tradition is about development of types. When generation after generation has solved the same problem (with the same content), then the result will of necessity become more and more harmonious and splendid: a type will appear.’ He himself worked with a new challenge, the electrical light pendant, using new materials and technology, but he used most of this thirty page article to state that most designs ought to keep with traditionally developed forms and materials. New forms are only to be allowed if they address new problems. Although this dogma was based on the Werkbund philosophy of types – and Henningsen himself was a declared internationalist – it underscored a criticism that safeguarded the
moral and aesthetic ideals of simple everyday objects, and which would later be praised as the unique
Danish tradition. The catalogue for the exhibition of Danish Industrial Art at the New York World
Fair 1939 concluded likewise:

Danish Industrial Art possesses a homely tone in nature and character, capricious effects having been
unknown to us. But our best works are characterized by the will to produce genuine, technical
workmanship, a sound critical attitude to untimely modernism, but also a natural desire to take up the
problems for renewed investigation and solution in accordance to the exigencies of the times.25

‘Untimely modernism’ could be understood both as fashion-led style and as ideology
that called for a ‘sound’ scepticism. It is tempting to see this insistent idea of ‘style immunity’ as
kindred to the claim that Denmark – along with the fellow Nordic countries – has been immune to
ideologies. The political scientist Bernd Henningsen makes this claim in the anthology Nortopia from
2009: ‘Insofar as the Scandinavian societies particularly distinguish themselves from other European
societies by the fact that no ideological mass movements have arisen in the last 200 years, we are here
dealing with a kind of ideological immunity.’26 The hesitant Danish reception of the modernist
ideology of design seemed to absorb them in more reformist discussions and activities, as Bernd
Henningsen stresses. International styles, i.e. functionalism and organic modernism, certainly played a
role in Danish design; they were, however, interpreted in conjunction with local virtues.

**Timelessness and self-exoticisation**

If we look at post-war discussions of the national character of design in Denmark, the ideas of
independence and the role of indigenous traditions or exceptional conditions seemed only
strengthened by the strong international interest in Danish Modern of the 1950s. This was expressed
both in Danish periodicals for internal, professional debates and in international publications.

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[Fig. 3 Steen Eiler Rasmussen on Bauhaus and the Danish Applied Arts, spread from Dansk
Kunsthaandværk 1960. The avant-garde Rietveld chair of 1917 is juxtaposed with the Danish]
‘functional tradition’ seen in the coarse/office chairs, 1907, of the Copenhagen Town Hall by Martin Nyrop and the tram by Knud V. Engelhardt, 1910.

The fiercest demarcation of a Danish tradition came from professor of architecture at the Royal Academy, Steen Eiler Rasmussen, who in 1960 denied any substantial influence from Bauhaus because of the humble focus on usability and quality in Denmark. ‘You can see these tendencies as natural in a small, densely populated country, where you have to be frugal with what you have, where you have to subdivide and refine, where budget and considerations of use still have to come first.’\(^7\) Once again this understanding of ‘Danish virtues’ is defended against the vices of modernity. ‘Alongside all the dictates of fashion and effect seeking, though, will there not still be a need for the modest Danish object which is thoroughly worked, made to last and to serve as a good and solid tool?’\(^8\) As Rasmussen himself had promoted the Bauhaus pedagogy in Denmark back in 1928, and had been the initial advisor for the Functionalist design program of FDB (Danish Consumers Cooperative Society) for mass production and through the years became an internationally acclaimed scholar, this was not just a case of ignorance. There was indeed a series of relations between Bauhaus and Denmark, as Nan Dahlkild has listed.\(^9\) The Danish designers and architects, however, might have thought that the success of Danish design was a reward for their fidelity to this tradition of modest virtues and the cultural and geographical conditions of the country. Rasmussen even repeated the idea of style-immunity, dating it back to the National Romanticist grand œuvre, the Copenhagen Town Hall, 1892-1902. ‘In a period, where Van de Velde worked to create representational furniture in Art Nouveau style, Martin Nyrop designed standard office furniture for Copenhagen town hall, wonderfully unconcerned whether they would be conceived to be in a modern or non-modern style.’\(^10\)

Around 1960 the discourse we are following developed an extra layer of self-reflection and responsiveness to the international attention. In the inter-war years Danish designers had felt
themselves measured by the standards of international modernism. But Denmark was now identified on the world map of design and could distinguish its values from the international movements. And these values are once again claimed to be aesthetic refinement, economy of materials, usability, durability and tool-like character of objects for domestic use as based on the tradition of arts and crafts. At exhibitions such ‘modest Danish objects’ were staged aesthetically in the most advanced minimalist settings, and on the international markets of consumer goods they were luxury items for an educated elite. But rhetorically they were explained as born out of necessity, out the common habitual practice of this little, homogenous country, sheltered from the storms of rapid economic development.

This image was part of the design diplomacy of Danish professional associations, trade organisations and state agencies that shared an interest in promoting this image of high societal and cultural integrity due to special historical and geopolitical conditions. Kjetil Fallan has shown how the official picture of Norwegian design presented at the Milan Triennali throughout the 1950s concealed severe conflicts of interest between crafts and industrial design. These interests might have been more mixed in Denmark, but no less heterogeneous. Industrial production of furniture and other design items increased in Denmark throughout the 1950s, but this design was often exhibited and photographed side by side with crafts to rub shoulders and represent the same values. In the Danish Society of Arts and Craft and Industrial Design in particular this produced tensions, as Fallan mentions, and Hansen digs into, especially the quarrels over the joint sales exhibition, Den Permanente. The relations between arts, crafts and industrial design were presented and understood as an inherited, unbroken continuity, where Danish design naturally budded on the strong stems of arts and crafts traditions. The book Made in Denmark, quoted at the beginning of my article, expressed the same understanding and sought to present in detail how Danish artist-craftsmen and industrial designers worked in different ways, but as part of the same culture, where one could still experience how things were made and regain a sense of quality.
This picture of an age-old, well-grounded aesthetic experience of form-giving – just shifted to industrial means – was later underlined by archaeological objects presented as tools of the ancestors. In the context of international exhibitions these objects functioned as exotica, and they exemplify and materialise a mode of self-exoticisation in the discourse of Danish design we have traced. This modus makes it clear how the presentations and descriptions of Danish design are responding to an already formed curiousness about Denmark as exotic exception to global developments. This is a different kind of exoticism to orientalism or dreams of remote paradise islands because it refers to a part of the European cultural heritage, i.e. Old World exotica. But it is still a lost world, a former crafts-based society, invoked by objects and images.

The notion of ‘exoticism’ is most notably used in post-colonial studies to discuss how westerners have described foreign cultures as reflections of their own desires for the Other, the exotic. ‘[…] exoticism describes, rather, a particular mode of aesthetic perception – one which renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender to its immanent mystery,’ as mentioned by Huggan.33 Glambek mentions how the applied arts of the Nordic countries assumed the role of exotica in the English and German reviews of the international exhibition around 1900. The Scandinavians were the new barbarians injecting young energy or new blood into European art. At the same time, they were paradoxically celebrated for preserving traditions lost to the more industrialised parts of Europe, and this formed the intricate figure of both modern and traditional at one and the same time, the perfect balance other cultures could, and precisely did, dream of.34 The Danish self-assessments quoted here were surely influenced by this and were formulated along the way to fit into the role others dreamt of.

It is this adjustment to a foreign image of the exotic that is considered here as ‘self-exoticisation’. This notion has been used in fashion studies, especially in explaining the case of Japanese designers’ revolution of Parisian fashion in the 1980s. Designers such as Kenzo, Miyake and
Kawakubo at the same time both confirmed Paris as centre of the fashion system and performed as the exotic Other from the Far-East, the perfect newness, which fashion always longs for and is driven by, according to fashion scholar Lise Skov. ‘Without much care about facilitating a sober understanding of a new phenomenon, the fashion press gorged on images that enforced Japan’s otherness from the West—images that seemed to contradict the industrial development, urbanization, and sophisticated consumer market which were the very conditions for the international breakthrough.’ This total disinterest in the industrial background and other conditions of modernity is recognized in the presentations of Danish Modern as well. The audience abroad were just not interested in such perspectives, and mute industrial products were turned into props in this self-exoticising staging. Marie Riegels Melchior has also shown how fashion firms throughout the last decades have tried to evoke a Danish tradition of fashion by referring to the internationally praised values of Danish design and using ‘self-exoticisation as design strategy’.

[Fig. 4 Photo from The Arts of Denmark, view from the second room, exhibition design by Finn Juhl, Metropolitan Museum of Art 1960, from Dansk Kunsthændværk, Vol. 7-8, 1960]

The Arts of Denmark 1960-61

The emphatic manifestation of this self-exoticisation of Danish design might be the exhibition The Arts of Denmark. Viking to Modern organized by the Danish Society of Arts and Craft and Industrial Design, shown at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and travelling to a few other locations. The ‘Arts’ in this presentation were a long line of decorative arts from prehistoric engravings and Neolithic stone axes to stainless steel flatware and melamine bowls. Only a handful of paintings, portraits and architectural prospects of Jens Juel and Chr. Købke, V. Hammershøi and V. Lundstrøm, were included, so the message of the exhibition was that Danish art was an age-old tradition of handicraft combining art and functional purposes. Fine arts were totally integrated in this
tradition, leading seamlessly to industrial design. Edgar Kaufmann Jr. was both co-organizer and the American voice expressing the international understanding and reputation of Danish Modern, and his catalogue contribution, An American View of the Arts of Denmark and Danish Modern Design, painted exactly the picture of modern Denmark as the geographical and historical exception to the general development:

Despite this wide-awake attitude in all the arts of the tide of functionalist modernism that in the 1930s swept over countries as close to Denmark, culturally and geographically, as Sweden, England, Germany and Finland, found no ready echo in the Copenhagen designers. [...] Machine art evidently seemed too sensational in a community where industry was less influential than rural occupations. 37

Kaufmann’s ‘American view’ corresponds with the Danish framing of the catalogue.

The prestigious exhibition was not only under the patronage of President Eisenhower and the Danish King Frederik IX, but the catalogue presented a foreword by Danish Prime Minister, Viggo Kampmann. In this short text we find both the geographical argument for Denmark as a special case, a culture adapting slowly to rapid developments, and, paradoxically, the counter-argument that culture and art crosses all borders:

Owing to the geographical location of Denmark, on the outskirts of the European World, many cultural currents reached the country slowly and often by devious routes. But then we have had better opportunities than many other nations to bring the currents reaching us from abroad into consonance with our own outlook and, as evidenced in past and present achievements, we have had peace and quiet to create something ourselves. [...] There is in Danish culture a sound balance between the influence of various other cultures and national root, balance which has determined and will continue to determine the development and flourishing of culture. Culture and art take no notice of national boundaries and continents. This is why Denmark ventured to cross the Atlantic with this exhibition. 38

This foreword produces the perfect exoticism as described above. Denmark is both presented as a very remote place, ‘on the outskirts’, and domesticated for the American audience, as ‘culture and art take no notice of boundaries and continents’. As self-exoticisation it is more open to admit cultural exchange, because this is a precondition to develop an international reputation on a world market.
But the exhibition certainly maintains the myth in its assemblage of 1950s industrial design with archaeological findings, medieval treasury and fine arts.

The catalogue was, of course, written for a foreign audience and thereby might differ from the domestic self-assessment of Danish Design. But if we return once more to the quotes of Rasmussen above from the same year, 1960, addressing an audience of Danish professionals, we can read his quite fierce defence of national qualities of modesty, refinement and functionality as an act of self-exoticisation as well. Where Danish design had adapted to international markets in its heyday, he feared for its future image. Therefore, he insisted even more emphatically than earlier commentators on the special conditions of Denmark as a ‘small, densely populated country’, still driven more by needs than dreams and unspoiled by foreign impulses and international trends. This image had to be maintained as self-understanding in the design trade. Hansen discusses The Art of Denmark exhibition as an attempt to consolidate the success of Danish Design that already showed its first signs of crisis as Danish Modern gradually went out of fashion in the US market in the 1960s."

**Beyond Danish Modern**

I have presented this long row of examples from Danish debates on international impulses and countervailing national traits to show how this discourse has summed up and formed the background even for contemporary presentations of Danish Design. There are elements of self-fulfilment and blind spots that keep this constellation of tropes running. But I have also tried to point out, how the development and accentuation of this topos changed in encounters with international exchanges and market conjunctures. We can discern elements of self-exoticisation all the way through, because it works both on internal as well as external audiences, but it is most evident in periods of strong, international attention, as around 1900 and in the 1950s. The inter-war years showed a more diverse range of competing views on where the Danish way between modernism and tradition should lead.
If we look into some Danish examples after 2000, we could take the historical survey *Dansk Design* from 2006 by Thomas Dickson. Though he is quite cautious to stress international impulses in Danish design history, ‘You are not alone, Denmark’, Dickson says a lot more about the formative force of Danish nature and society than international relations. And though the book mostly covers 20th century design, we are introduced to archaeological evidence of the creativity of our ancestors. In the section on transport design we are suddenly presented with no fewer than eight pages on Viking ships, which bring us back to *The Arts of Denmark. Viking to Modern*. Dickson’s survey has its strength in showing very broad scales of design, graphics, fashion, tools and urban design elements, but they are selected to confirm the same values of Danish design. And the self-exoticisation evident in invocations of a Viking perspective, the role of nature and the welfare society is persistent. It is no doubt a fine introduction to a certain mind-set of Danish designers and design institutions that has been produced and constantly upheld by both public debate and marketing, but it is difficult to recognise the values in the very design objects themselves.

We can look further at the homepage of Muuto, a design firm that brands itself as ‘New Nordic’ and has, in fact, stressed that they do not want to repeat Danish Modern. The presentation of one of their designers, the Danish furniture designer Louise Campbell, insists, however, on rationality (equals functionality), refinement, craftsmanship and nature:

We have inherited the thrill of rational thinking, the joy of detail, and the strive for good craftsmanship from our predecessors. But times are different; technology, speed and the state of mind have changed. These years Scandinavian design is going through a refreshing renewal, but without losing the basic strength of our tradition. To put this metaphorically: The Scandinavian designer of today has one foot in an airplane and the other solidly planted in the Nordic nature.

The poor metaphor of foothold seems significant for the loose connection to any evidence of renewal in this statement. The statement takes pains to mention both ‘Scandinavian’ and ‘Nordic’ and to secure a link between the well-known Scandinavian Modern and the trendy New Nordic.
seems to be too narrow as reference here, but the rest of the world beyond Scandinavia is absent, despite the ‘one foot on an airplane’.

As well-established designer Louise Campbell has also been a member of the committee appointed by the Danish Ministry of Culture to select a canon of Danish design. This was part of a general Danish Culture Canon published in 2006 covering all the fine arts. In the general introduction to Danish design the panel expressed the following historical reflection: 'It was only partly that Denmark got into the industrial age, despite the effort of the Cultural Radicals. And it’s also too late now. The age of industry is over, and Denmark was never a leading industrial nation.'

This is an interesting post-script to the many statements on the closeness to crafts traditions exhibited even in Danish industrial design. As if it did not matter whether Denmark did skip industrialisation in its historical development, because now knowledge, media and creativity set the agenda. Denmark has never been a 'leading' industrial nation, but a broad scope of industrial design has followed the technological and commercial conditions of industry and consumption. And though late industrialisation, smaller scale industry, a shortage of raw materials and strategic merging of arts and crafts traditions did condition Danish design, we cannot repress the role of industry in this way and see Denmark as an isolated, special case.

**Crafting the design nation**

If we, finally, return to the question of when and why this rhetorical topos of Danish design as independent of influences arose, I cannot see the mature version of it much before 1900, where we found it in Emil Hannover. The aesthetic ideal of the ‘pure taste’ of simple but refined forms had been expressed earlier. In his 1845 lecture *On the Fashion and the Pure Taste*, the architect and design teacher Gustav Fr. Hetsch thinks that Denmark must be thankful for ‘our more isolated position’, because ‘the poor as well as the good from abroad arrives somewhat later’ and can be moderated. We have a linking of taste and geography here, but Hetsch doesn’t point to any national
character, and his talk is in fact an introduction to his translation of Percier & Fontaine’s *Collection of Interior Decorations*, i.e. French Empire style.

[Fig. 5 Glazed earthenware by Carl Petersen, own workshop, 1904-05, Faaborg Museum, photo by Kirstine Mengel. The study of Japanese crafts not only encouraged Danish designers to cultivate minimalist forms, but also to reflect on their sensibility to ‘material effects’, as Petersen as later professor at the Royal Academy expressed in an often reprinted lecture.]

If we turn to Japonism, though, through the help of Mirjam Gelfer-Jørgensen’s *Influences from Japan in Danish Art and Design 1870-2010*, we ironically encounter more of the ingredients. She points to how Danish artists in the last decades of the 19th century wanted to mirror Denmark in Japan as an isolated culture driving age-old crafts to stunningly perfection by focusing on simplicity and modest nature motifs. Denmark was not isolated, though, and the artists had to search for crafts to revitalize. As exotica, however, the Japanese applied arts inspired artists to explore new artistic genres and forms and develop a National Romanticism, later called Skønvirke, based on local nature and materials – this time as self-exoticisation. Japonism had this influence across Europe and inspired the applied arts by levelling the hierarchy of the arts, so even the most practical object for everyday use could be designed as a work of fine art. That the Japanese craftsman could have the status as a fine artist was celebrated, but Geller-Jørgensen has elsewhere noted that in Denmark this inspired artists more to put their signature on every design rather than raising craftsmen to fame. The pervasive cult of designer names is still underlined by snapshots of the designers’ ‘craftsmanship’.

This influence from Japan seemed to be tied together with the self-fashioning of Danish applied arts and architecture around 1900 and has, in different forms, lasted longer than elsewhere. Geller-Jørgensen states innumerable examples throughout the 20th century, but has no clear explanations for the ‘kinship’. If Japonism initiated the self-exoticisation of Danish design, as I see it,
this could lead us to a more layered understanding of influences and self-conceptions. In this way I hope my historical sketch of the tendency to self-exoticisation can contribute to the historiographical discussions on Danish design.

Japonism strengthened a focus on crafts around 1900, but more as artistic, inventive workshop activities than an actual rise in craft production. If we distinguish more rigidly between industrial products, manufactured luxury goods, and craft items, the last category was rapidly diminishing in numbers – together with craft apprentices. Craft-based production of furniture was the longest lasting, but the understanding around 1900 was definitely not that the Danish craft tradition was strong and would last the coming century. The artists rather looked for a lost tradition, and this enhanced their protectionism. This idea of the ‘lost thread’ and the revitalizing – or invention – of tradition is mentioned by one of the patriarchs of modern Danish architecture and design, P.V. Jensen-Klint: ‘[…] we are searching after the lost thread, and if we find it, we will bind a new tradition so firmly that even the less educated architects will build with taste, because they will know nothing else.’

In the global, geographic perspective of international history of design, Denmark was close to the European centres of development and did take part in the industrialisation and commercialisation of designed goods. But through a narrow focus on comparisons to neighbouring countries this affected the self-understanding among designers and commentators in Denmark, and it was turned into a self-fulfilling spiral of self-exoticisation that has been fuelled by national discussions as well as international trends, most recently nation branding and global image economy. It would be interesting to continue the discussions beyond Denmark and see comparisons to similar self-conceptions in other design nations. I have pointed to Finland, but there are other interesting parallels between for example Dutch and Danish design in different periods of the 20th century. The current image of the Netherlands as a design nation, however, took off in the 1980s and ‘90s with a newer and no less
paradoxical stress on international qualities as a national tradition. Dutch design is perceived as strong
on abstraction, conceptualism and the organization of society, and this was not only seen as a branch
of international modernism, but also descending nationally from Calvinist Protestantism and a
broader cultural history of the Netherlands."

Anna Calvera points to the importance of seeing how variously the idea of and the very
word ‘design’ were received around the globe because of differing conditions and situations. “The
next step is to analyse how craft traditions and cultural background have influenced the idea of
Design, making up a new synthesis and arguably, a new and different modernity.” Surely, there is no
lack of focus on Danish craft traditions; on the contrary, there are a lot more stories on Danish
industrial design that remain to be written. But the ideas of design in Denmark developed out of
discussions on geographical differences on a more regional scale and a self-exoticisation based on the
‘marketing mix’ of arts, crafts and design. To what degree this made up an alternative modernity, as
the wishful depictions of Danish Modern showed, is questionable. But the geography of design has
played a decisive role on the ‘outskirts of the European world’ as well.

1 A. Karlsen & A. Tiedemann, *Made in Denmark*, J. Gjellerup, Copenhagen, 1960
2 An early sketch of this article was discussed at ICDHS 2014. See A.V. Munch, ‘Putting Yourself in
the Centre? A short essay on Danish interventions of tradition’, workshop-paper, ICDHS 2014
Aveiro, Sao Paolo: *Blucher Design Proceedings 5/1*, pp. 699-702
3 I. Glambek, *Det nordiske i arkitektur og design sett utenfra*, Arkitektenes Forlag & Norsk
Arkitekturforlag, Copenhagen & Oslo, 1997. For an English short version see: Glambek, ‘’Nordic
Form’ as seen from the Outside. The interpretation of Nordic design and architecture outside the
5 K. Davies, ‘Markets, Marketing, and Design: the Danish furniture industry c. 1947-65’, *Scandinavian
Journal of Design History*, vol. 9, 1999, p. 71f. See also his ‘Scandinavian Furniture in Britain: Finmar
6 P. H. Hansen, *Da danske møbler blev moderne*, University of Southern Denmark Press &
Aschehoug, Odense 2006; ‘Networks, Narratives, and New Markets: The Rise and Decline of Danish
‘Cobranding Product and Nation: Danish Modern Furniture and Denmark in the United States,
7 Hansen, Da danske møbler blev moderne, chapter 5, and Hansen, 'Cobranding Product and Nation’, p. 81
8 Hansen, 'Networks, Narratives, and New Markets’, note 19 is not far from an ingredient list of my article.
9 M. Geller-Jørgensen, Danish Neo-Antique Furniture. From Abildgaard to Kaare Klint, The Danish Museum of Decorative Art, Copenhagen 2004, and Møbler med mening vol. 1+2, Arkitekten’s Forlag, Copenhagen 2010
12 Guldberg states, though, that the authors avoided ‘attributions of exoticism’, so he seems to reserve this notion for a more specific understanding underlined by other references as Africa and ‘tribalism’, op.cit., p. 47.
13 Hansen, 'Cobranding Product and Nation’.  
15 Calvera, p. 381.
17 E. Hannover, ‘Rundskue over Europas Kunsthaandværk paa Verdensudstillingen, in Tidsskrift for Industri, August 1900, p. 206.
18 A.V. Munch, Der stillose Stil. Adolf Loos, Wilhelm Fink, Munich 2005
21 K. Klint, 'Om Mobeltegning’, Arkitekten Maanedshæfte, October 1930
23 Hansen, Da danske møbler blev moderne, pp. 158-60. Lassen got success at the exhibitions with upholstered easy chairs in 1935 & 36.
25 Danish Industrial Art, Foreningen Dansk Kunsthaandværk & Den Permanente, Copenhagen 1939, p. 5.
28 Ibid.
30 Rasmussen, p. 143
32 Hansen, Da danske møbler blev moderne, chapter 19.
34 Glambek, op.cit.
38 V. Kampmann, ‘Foreword’, in Lassen, op.cit., p. 7f.
39 Hansen, *Da danske møbler blev moderne*, chapter 17. See also the chapter on this exhibition in M. Mussari, Danish Modern. Between Art and Design, London 2016.
46 Ibid., p. 30.
47 Ibid., p. 60f.
48 Geller-Jørgensen, *Danish Neo-Antique Furniture*, p. 11.