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Signifying modernity in post-colonial South Asia: the appropriation of Knoll International chairs in Geoffrey Bawa's Sri Lankan interiors

Adopting a case study approach, this paper discusses the appropriation of certain Knoll International chairs within the domestic and commercial interiors of the internationally recognized Sri Lankan architect Geoffrey Bawa during the 1960s. This paper contributes to an understanding of the process through which the products of Knoll were received, appropriated and manufactured, through small-scale import substitution, in Sri Lanka during the 1960s. This paper also seeks to problematize the routes or circuits through which post-war modern furniture was received overseas. It challenges a view that these consumer goods expressed America's political and socio-economic strengths in a straight forward and unproblematic manner.

The period between 1960 and 1965 was politically, economically and culturally perhaps the most unfavourable time in Sri Lanka for the reception of American goods and ideas. The recently elected left-wing government adopted an anti-western tilt to its foreign and domestic policies. Consequently, in 1960-61, controls were imposed on foreign exchange; all luxury and many essential goods were eliminated from the country's import bill. Yet, against this background, key examples of American post-war design were selectively appropriated (through the small group of architects in Geoffrey Bawa's circle) as 'signifiers of modernity'.

This paper examines the appropriation and processes of small-scale import substitution of three examples of Knoll International furniture:

Eero Saarinen's 'tulip' chair; Ferrari-Hardoy's 'Butterfly' chair and Mies van der Rohe's 'Barcelona' chair. These objects, part of the 'ideoscape' (Appadurai) of American post-war modernity, were copied from widely circulated visual representations and manufactured in an ad hoc, low technology manner on the island. By copying from publications (as well as from a few actual models) and local, un-licensed manufacture, these objects were transformed through localized appropriation and situated in a new post-colonial, non-western context. This paper contributes a new understanding to the complex, non-linear and mobile connections between American post-war design as signifier of modernity and its place in the developing cultural identity of a new South Asian nation-state.