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Industrial designer Robin Levien faces our random questioning this month...

HOW AND WHEN DID YOU FIRST BECOME INTERESTED IN DESIGN?

I got interested in ceramics when I was a 15-year-old schoolboy – a new art master introduced me to it. I went to the Central School of Art and Design and then on to the Royal College of Art, studying ceramics at both. However, both were based on something of an 'arty crafty' angle and it wasn't until the end of my second year at the RCA that another key teacher helped me to make a life-changing decision. One of the part-time tutors on the ceramics course was Hans Cooper who in my view was the greatest ceramicist of the last century. I had a half hour tutorial with Hans and at the end of it I realised that I should be a designer not an artist. So I can trace the beginning of my career in design to that precise moment.

AT WHAT TIME OF DAY DO YOU FIND THE MOST INSPIRATION?

As I am drifting off to sleep at around midnight.

WHICH DESIGNER/ARCHITECT DO YOU ADMIRE THE MOST AND WHY?

Tapio Wirkkala from Finland who died in 1985. He developed his ideas through model making and was inspired by nature. For Wirkkala, the form of an object was not just an aesthetic goal or intellectual perception but the outcome of a dialogue between hand, eye and material.

WHAT PROFESSION WOULD YOU HAVE PURSUED HAD YOU NOT BECOME A DESIGNER?

Definitely a chef, I enjoy cooking and get great pleasure from pleasing people through giving them good food. I guess I have a need for approbation which I get through design but with cooking it's more immediate.

WHAT MUSIC INSPIRES YOU?

I have a very eclectic taste in music but the common ground is the human voice, so it can be Bob Dylan, Nina Simone or Angela Gheorghiu singing Puccini.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE CITY IN THE WORLD AND WHY?

Perhaps Venice because it separates me so effectively from my normal world. Everything is old and I can really switch off, although after four or five days I crave London, where I am from, and when I think about it that is my favourite city.

DESCRIBE YOUR DESIGN PHILOSOPHY IN ONE WORD

Restraint.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE MEMORY FROM UNIVERSITY?

The furniture department had a visit from a great American designer called Charles Eames. I was in ceramics but sneaked into the back of the class. The students showed him their work and at the end he told them they were all trying to make their designs too beautiful and that he always put a bit of 'ugly' into his designs. That was a revelation that I will never forget.

WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF DESIGNING FOR SO MANY DIFFERENT COMPANIES?

The advantages are that 'diversity is strength'. I have clients all over the world, which offers some stability from a business perspective. From their point of view the wide experience I have of manufacturing and markets is useful. One disadvantage is travelling. I never understand it when the captain on the flight deck says: "I hope you enjoyed the flight."

Studio Levien only works with Ideal Standard in the bathroom industry but we have many clients in the tableware industry – the other end of the alimentary canal! This is a case of our greatest strength being our greatest weakness because we can't work for two companies who are directly competing with one another.

WHAT HAS BEEN THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE FOR YOU THROUGHOUT YOUR CAREER?

To get a better balance in my life. I am too obsessed with design and over-indulge myself.

Robin Levien is an award-winning industrial designer who has designed with a wide range of clients including Morso, Villeroy & Boch, Costa Verde, Guzzini and Ideal Standard, for whom he is also non-executive Design Director

WHAT BOOK ARE YOU CURRENTLY READING?

I just finished *Blink* by Malcolm Gladwell. It is a fascinating book about how important intuition is. There is a story in there about the Getty Museum buying a Greek statue that had been authenticated by scientific testing – it took one or two learned scholars to identify that it was a fake. It just didn't 'feel' right to them.

WHAT ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT CHALLENGES FACING DESIGNERS/ARCHITECTS TODAY?

In the short term, surviving the recession. In the long term, surviving global warming.

HOW WELL DO YOU FEEL YOUR EDUCATION/TRAINING PREPARED YOU FOR THE WORLD OF WORK?

Brilliantly and hardly at all! I used to think it was the responsibility of educational institutions to prepare us for the world of work but I now think they should focus on creativity and thinking and that we learn best when there is a need. For university graduates, the first year of work is the last year of university. My seven years in further education was mostly spent making ceramics and that is what has sustained my career. I learnt to write a contract after university.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE TV PROGRAMME?

The X Factor.

WHO WOULD YOU MOST LIKE TO DESIGN SOMETHING FOR?

A flashing lie detector implant for Barack Obama – power corrupts!

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO YOUNG PEOPLE TRYING TO BREAK INTO THE INDUSTRY TODAY?

In design, your portfolio is your ticket. Within education you show all the stages in a project as evidence of work, but in professional practice you show a finished concept. My advice to any design graduate is to get a professional designer to give you advice on your portfolio then use that portfolio to get a job in a design practice where you can learn about the commercial world as well as develop your design skills. **designer**

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Eames Chaise
Design: Charles & Ray Eames, 1948 © Vitra Collections AG