

The Contribution of Jordi Vilanova to the Identity of a Mediterranean Character in Spanish Design

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The so-called Mediterranean style is one of the identity marks of Spanish design, being a style born out of concrete historical, geographical, cultural and political circumstances. Such a style is characterized by pure, simple forms, without ornament, atemporal,

functional, and with a strong cultural component. The Catalan interior designer Jordi Vilanova belongs to this style; that becomes patent in his own ideology, based on the humanistic attitude of the multi-disciplinary group La Cantonada, to which he pertained. This

study intends to prove the contribution of Vilanova's work to the Mediterranean style in Spanish design through the analysis of some of his furniture and interior design projects.

Identity and design

The concept "identity" refers to a quality or set of qualities with which one person or a group of people feel themselves intimately connected. In this sense, identity has to do with the way in which individuals and groups define themselves when relating – "identifying" – with certain characteristics (MOLANO, 2008). Gui Bonsiepe (2012) posed a list of concepts that can be useful to analyze how identity would materialize in the field of design:

1. In the form of a set of formal or chromatic features.
2. In the taxonomies of products, that is, in the types of products distinctive of a culture.
3. In the use of local materials and its corresponding manufacturing methods.
4. In the use of a specific project method (empathy with a determined tradition rooted in a region).
5. In the theme typical of the context.

Moreover, Guy Julier (2006) remarks on the importance of the role of design in the creation of identities, envisaging design as a cultural practice with an economic value. According to Julier (2010), one identity is marked by circumstances like geography, culture, politics, economy, etc. Finally, the term "design culture" proposed by Julier highlights the importance of products communicating with the users, transmitting an identity, so a series of values are detected by users.

Mediterranean design

Contrary to what happens in Scandinavian or Italian design, there is a clear absence of bibliographical references and scientific investigation works that address the matter of Mediterranean design. There are some recent publications that address the Mediterranean identity in design. One is Martínez, Pastor and López (2014): "Mediterranean influence in the Spanish design identity", and the other is the doctoral thesis in the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia defended by Laura Beatriz Picca (2016): "Diseño mediterráneo. Bases para la creación de un modelo".

In Europe there is an ample diversity of cultures and subcultures. The greatest distinction we can find is between Mediterranean culture (found in Spain, Italy, France and Greece), and Anglo-Saxon culture, in northern countries like the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries. As a result of it, we can say that there are a series of

values and dimensions peculiar to Mediterranean or Southern European culture, and values and dimensions peculiar to the Anglo-Saxon culture or Northern European culture (PICCA, 2016).

It happens the same inside the Mediterranean region. According to Vanni Pasca (2009), the Mediterranean is a group of regions marked by cultural, social and geographical similarities and differences. Regarding industrial design there are countries with an industrial approach, versus countries with a clearly artisanal one. In this spectrum, Spain and the Latin Mediterranean lay in-between, being a region that combines tradition and present.

Spanish design

Design is intimately linked to the development of industry, and in Spain there was a very late, slow and fragmented industrializing process, unevenly spread among different areas of the Spanish territory. In the 1950s, there were already two regions with consolidated economic power: the Basque Country, thanks to the development of a metallurgical industry, and Catalonia, whose textile industry had been structured around small companies (JULIER, 1991). Thus, the first industrial areas were in the Pyrenees and the Mediterranean. This industrial lateness allowed artisan tradition to disappear later in Spain than in other countries like Italy or France, where craftsmanship was transformed earlier (MARTÍNEZ, PASTOR and LÓPEZ, 2014).

The Spanish territory has also various languages, traditions and nationalities, which complicates the procurement of the main features of Spanish industrial design (CAPELLA, 2010). However, inside this diversity and eclecticism, we can say that the influence of the Mediterranean sharpens (MARTÍNEZ, PASTOR and LÓPEZ, 2014).

This so-called Mediterranean style in Spanish design shares mainly aspects like the use of local materials such as wood, ceramics, glass and textiles; and a low technological level due to a slow industrialization, which has allowed the survival of traditional artisanal production techniques. Martínez, Pastor and López (2014) conclude, after an analysis of relevant cases in the history of Spanish design, that the Mediterranean style or character is defined by its purity, simplicity, transcendence in time, far from vanguards and trends, and with a high cultural com-

ponent and whose functionality is above all, as long as it transmits certain local feelings and emotions.

The historical, geographical, cultural and political circumstances generate some features in design, hence generating a specific style. This Mediterranean style grants identity to Spanish style and is key in speaking about a local design culture (JULIER, 2010). We cannot forget that design as a discipline is also affected by political phases and changes that countries goes through. Hence in Spain it went from being a suspicious activity for the Francoist regime, because of its ties to modernity, to be recognized beyond its borders during the 1960s thanks to the end of the autarchic period, and finally becoming part of the cultural environment after the fall of the dictatorial regime, with a widely publicized boom in design.

The case of Catalonia

Catalonia was the first area in Spain to live through the industrializing process and with time it became an example by obtaining its own design culture, alien to the rest of the country. An urban and social rethinking took place, that served as an example to other European cities, and which evoked such values as modernity, Europeism and technology. To become the best example of change from the previous regime, Catalonia used design as a tool of change, understanding this activity as a cultural practice, with an economic value (JULIER, 2005).

Jordi Vilanova and La Cantonada, an ideology of its own

Within this Mediterranean style has been classified, in multiple occasions, Jordi Vilanova i Bosch (1925–1998), a Catalan interior designer and cabinet maker whose career started in Barcelona at the beginning of the 1950s, peaked in the 1960–70s, and continued until his death.

Among his first works of Mediterranean character must be included the series of furniture that Vilanova conceived for a series of tenements in working-class neighborhoods of Poblenou and La Bordeleta, built by the architect Jordi Bonet in the late 1950s. It was a full furnishing of a flat for just 30,000 pesetas (VÉLEZ, 1999) that included bedrooms, living rooms, seats, curtains, bedspreads, etc. They were characterized for being simple, functional, combinable and specially thought out for small spaces and economies: a 'Mediterranean solution' (BONET, 1995). However, the proposal was not well received by the future tenants who, as happened with other vanguard projects, refused having in their living rooms functional and sincere furniture, which showed their cheapness.

Later Vilanova co-founded the artistic multidisciplinary group La Cantonada (1960–1975), which carried out integral public art projects with a humanis-

tic character, and proposed the renovation of sacred art through the company *Ars Sacra*. The group was also formed by the ceramist Jordi Aguadé, the goldsmith and jewelry maker Aureli Bisbe, the architect Jordi Bonet and the painter Joan Vila-Grau. It takes its name from the studio of Vilanova, situated on the corner of the streets Freixa with Ganduxer, and which became the central headquarters of the group where all members conversed, debated and organized different activities. Vilanova acted as a coalescer, an orchestra conductor (VALVERDE, 1963), coordinating and always looking for common and individual projects for all members.

While in 1960 design circles with a more industrialist character achieved official status thanks to their association with the already existing entity of the FAD (Foment de les Arts Decoratives), and leading to the Industrial Designers Association (ADI-FAD), La Cantonada organized its first permanent exhibition of the common works. An exhibition that is well documented in its catalogue for 1961, where they presented themselves as a 'team open to the present currents in a Mediterranean sensibility', showing their clear will to be linked to their origins and country, Catalonia.

The next year, the group participated jointly in an exhibition with the name I National Salon for Home and Decoration, in the Montesión galleries in Barcelona. Jordi Vilanova presented a bedroom and living room with 'white wood' furniture (Fig. 1), that won a mention in a contest that was called. From 1962 on, the FAD supported the organization of monographic salons called Hogarotel, destined to show the novelties in home automatization, decoration, hostelry and gastronomy. Vilanova attended those annual salons, both individually and with La Cantonada, with modern proposals that offered his very characteristic Mediterranean line (VÉLEZ, 1999), and that were adapted to the demands of new urban promotions.

The editions of Hogarotel with more repercussion took place in the late 1960s. In all of these editions, Vilanova and La Cantonada clearly positioned themselves on the opposite side of mass production and a standardized universe.

The ideology of La Cantonada was based on a truly humanistic attitude (VÉLEZ, 1999). Its beginnings coincided with the beginning of the development of industrial design in Catalonia, however that was based on different premises than La Cantonada's, seeking for a highly standardized product, produced in big series. Contrarily, La Cantonada opted for the creation of items in small series, made in a semi-artisanal way, adapted to specific necessities, with more personality and less technological. This is what art critic Joan Perucho qualified as the third way in La Cantonada's second catalogue:

Between an esthetic of masses and an esthetic of privilege, there is an esthetic "à la taille de l'homme", that is to say, for the common man. The economist Wilhelm Röpke called this [...] the third way. This third way, applied to our goal, is the "small series", and refers above all to objects for long-term use; those which go along with man and get integrated in a memory we could call intimate and familiar. The small series, versus the standardized universalization of big series, is inspired, on the contrary, on the stylistic localization of ways of living. It is then, a truly humanistic attitude. So it has been understood by the admirable team of La Cantonada who, for a long time, produces with growing success an order of creation fully immersed in the Mediterranean sensibility, and so very ours (PERUCHO, 1965).

In the year 1965, the invitation received to attend an exhibition in New York that promoted external trade made Vilanova decide to present a good collection of his products joined by this catalogue that included a selected sample of pieces by artists from La Cantonada. The assembly was carried out by Vilanova and Bonet and the sample was well received.¹

Although the chances of getting into the American market were slim, for Vilanova it was the consolidation of the idea that his proposal was valid, besides being more and more accepted by a customer base that was expanded and effective both in the city and either the coast or the mountains. According to Bonet (1995), Vilanova achieved a synthesis of traditional forms – of a Catalan wealthy peasantry or small rural bourgeoisie, even in the wealthy houses of the city – and a practical interpretation, well carried out, polished, sober and elegant, that could give satisfaction.

In the 1960–70s, before shops like Vinçon, Pilma, and more recently, IKEA appeared in Barcelona, Jordi Vilanova had already opened three shops that offered design services and sales of modern objects (CAMPI, 2016). Nowadays, Vilanova is known as the introducer in Spain and Catalonia of the ‘white wood’ furniture, that is to say, a furniture without color or shiny varnishes, functional, simple and refined, giving it a line of Mediterranean tradition.

Scandinavian influence in the work of Vilanova

We can say that the “style” of Jordi Vilanova, both in the furniture and in the environments, answers to rationalist criteria, and more concretely to its organicist current. Vilanova was a great admirer of Scandinavian furniture for its respect to the dignity of the wood and for its perfect quality and execution.

From what the Nordics have taught us, we make use of what has a practical and modern sense, but we try to create a Mediterranean style [based] on the creations of our regional craftsmanship, multiple in facets, all along the Mediterranean. That inspiration we can update, giving it a practical sense and a purity and stylization of lines befitting to modern tastes and requirements. From that popular furni-

ture we suppress all the accessory. In this way we get a functional style in which the artistic and the racial flavor are present. After all, Nordic furniture found its inspiration in the Mediterranean coasts (VILANOVA, 1964).

The core of Scandinavian countries – Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden – in spite of their differences, finds a common identity around industrial design as a promoter of a culture. The base of Scandinavian design is founded on its democratic approach, continuously in search of an ideal society, with a better quality of life through technology and functional and affordable objects (FIELL, 2003).

Around 1920, modern Scandinavian design was characterized by a moral humanistic attitude, rooted in the ideals of Lutheranism – official religion that promulgates salvation through work in the benefit of all. It is those beliefs that have influenced all the democratic philosophy from which Scandinavian design has evolved.

Although there are notable examples of innovative designs in Scandinavian countries before WWII, the real bloom of Nordic designers at an international level arrived in the early 1950s. In comparison with the rest of Western Europe and the United States, industrialization burst relatively late in Scandinavia, which allowed for a better preserving of the artisanal traditions (FIELL, 2003). Joining ancestral craftsmanship with modern design, Scandinavian designers manage to elaborate high quality items, suitable for industrial production.

Jordi Vilanova traveled a lot around Europe, and he promptly attended to furniture fairs. His favorite destination was the Copenhagen furniture fair sited at the Bella Center. Vilanova was a great lover of Danish design. In 1973 he started licensing some furniture pieces from designers Søren Nissen and Ebbe Ghel, and he also collaborated with the Danish design center Den Permanent.

For him, the synthesis between functionality and humanity, the balance between tradition and modernity typical of Nordic design provided a possible model to follow in Catalonia, not in the forms but in the spirit and productive modes. For him this was the example that in the South of Europe there could be produced a modern design that evoked the essences of the Mediterranean culture without falling into folklorism (CAMPI, 2016).

Project analysis

The following images show interior design projects and home decoration, with furniture and complements designed by Jordi Vilanova and some of the components of La Cantonada. They have been selected with the objective of analysis and prove their suitability to the parameters of the so-called Mediterranean design, previously described.



[1] As evidenced in the international press of the time. The famous columnist Eleanor Spaak wrote two articles (“Spanish Updated” and “Children today are more sophisticated than adults”) in the *Home Furnishings Daily* magazine, where she praises Jordi Vilanova’s work.

Fig. 1 Showroom, 1961 (© Fundació Història del Disseny).



Fig. 2 Living room, 1965 (© Fundació Història del Disseny).

According to Martínez, Pastor and López (2014), Mediterranean design shares aspects like the use of local materials and a low technological level due to slow industrialization, which has allowed the survival of traditional and artisanal production techniques; and is defined by its purity, simplicity, transcendence through time, far from vanguards and trends, with a highly cultural component and in which functionality is above all, while it transmits certain local feelings and emotions.

Through all the photographs we can observe a continued use of local materials. Wood is a constant resource in the work of Vilanova, since apart from decorator he was a cabinetmaker trained in the well-known Casa Busquets and in the workshop of the furniture maker Lluís Gili. He used pine and beech wood, with natural finish, without varnish (See Fig. 1, 2 and 4). In Figs. 3, 4 and 5 the wood has been lacquered in red (headboard, nightstands and cupboard) and blue (fronts of the kitchen cupboards).

Ceramics appear through the pavement and complements in decoration, provided by his colleagues of La Cantonada: ceramic panels with sacred themes, bowls and planters. Jordi Aguadé was trained with the well-known ceramist Llorens Artigas and worked jointly with the painter Joan Vila-Grau in the making of ceramic murals. In Fig. 5, the kitchen has been completely coated with ceramic tiles with a floral motive by Aguadé himself. The cover of the kitchen table has been coated with the same matching ceramic finish.

The textiles are natural in origin, like cotton used in the covers and upholstery of seats and cushions (Fig. 2) and the bedspreads and curtains in Fig. 3 and 4. The floral motives are from painter Vila-Grau. Other fabrics of natural origin are applied in the furniture, like the bulrush in the headboard, chairs and stools in Fig. 1, 3 and 4, or the raffia in the carpets and baskets in Figs. 1 and 2. The textiles of animal origin, like leather, are used in the seats of the chairs and the stools and in the beds, through the technique of *tiracord* (Fig. 1 and 2), and the upholstery of the kitchen chairs (Fig. 5).

Moreover, artisanal and traditional production techniques survive especially in the production of furniture through their own 'editing' at a small scale. Local techniques also stand out like the *tiracord* – consisting in the crisscrossing of leather straps that run through leads in the wood, or the weaving of bulrush for the seat fabrics, that Vilanova also applies to the headboard of the bed (Fig. 3).

Vilanova configured functional spaces, clear and luminous, where he controlled the Mediterranean light through curtains, and used plants to moisturize the environment. He was the creator of a kind of furniture based on pure lines, simple and orthogonal, that answers to the wish for formal austerity defended by the group. The most important thing was its functionality over stylistic vanguards, ensuring its persistence through time. Such persistence was also ensured thanks to the quality of the materials. The high cultural component links to the group's humanistic moral attitude, that refers back to the North of Europe, but with a native point of view.

Conclusions

As indicated at the beginning of the text, design has an important role for a group of individuals to create its own identity, with the intention of differentiating themselves, since the products communicate a series of values that are detected by the users. At the same time, a series of concepts elaborated by Bonsiepe can help explain how an identity materializes through design:

1. In the way of a set of formal or chromatic characteristics. That is to say, through the contribution of the own designer, in this case, of Jordi Vilanova. It is a modern proposal for simple furniture, functional, with pure lines, sincere, combinable, thought out for small spaces and small economies. In general, pieces are of white wood, without color or dark varnishes.
2. In the taxonomies of products, the types of products typical of a culture. Among the furniture by Vilanova we can highlight those destined to furnish bedrooms, dining rooms and living rooms. But he also worried about decorating with lighting and decoration accessories befitting to the spaces, like curtains, bedspreads, lamps and other items. They are spaces thought out for the requirements of the new urban promotions of that time, but also perfectly valid for second homes in the coast or mountain.



Fig. 3 Double bedroom (© Fundació Història del Disseny).

3. In the use of local materials and their corresponding fabrication methods. The slow industrialization in Spain produced a low technological level, and thus, it allowed the survival of artisanal and traditional production techniques. Companies like Jordi Vilanova's subsisted through providers (carpenters, upholsters, metalworkers...), so they became a kind of 'editors'. Apart from that, the use of local (or national) prime materials like wood, leather, raffia, bulrush...
4. In the use of a specific project method. As we have seen, Vilanova and La Cantonada positioned themselves against the massification of big series and standardization, finding them dehumanizing. On the contrary, they advocated for the creation of objects with a humanistic character, adapted to specific needs based in an austere way of life, made in a semi-artisanal way and hence less technological. In short, "small series objects", those found between the esthetic of privilege (craftsmanship) and the esthetic of masses (industrialized items). We understand his will to create a language specific to Catalan design that was to be qualified as "Mediterranean", but inserted in the modern rationalist current and far from folklorism. The same way Scandinavian designers did it, uniting their artisanal traditions – preserved thanks to a late industrialization – with modern design.
5. In the thematic typical of the context. In a context of Francoist dictatorship during the 1960–70s, intellectual and cultural circles of Catalan society looked forward to standing out from a society impoverished through their circumstances and to modernizing themselves through design. It was a certain sector of the Catalan bourgeoisie that wanted to break from old style canons of the market, who widely accepted the style of furniture and space resolution that Vilanova proposed (FELIP, 1995).

In the consumption of such a proposal there is an identity strategy from this progressive Catalan sector that feels "identified" (connected, related) with the values of an ideology transmitted by the products of Vilanova and La Cantonada.



Fig. 4 Double bedroom (© Fundació Història del Disseny).



Fig. 5 Kitchen (© Fundació Història del Disseny).

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