

All wrapped up

IN LIFE, THEY SAY, IT ALL DEPENDS ON THE PERSONAL QUALITIES. BUT IF THEY ARE NOT PACKAGED BEAUTIFULLY, NOBODY IS INTERESTED IN SAY THE JAPANESE AND HAVE BEEN BECOMING MASTERS IN THEIR TRADE. BUT WHERE DOES THIS SENSE OF PERFECT SENSE OF DESIGN COME FROM, WHICH ALSO RUNS RIGHT THROUGH FROM AUTOMOBILES TO WATER MELON PACKAGING? OUR AUTHOR WHO LIVED AND WORKED IN JAPAN FOR A COUPLE OF YEARS, HAS GOT THE ANSWER.

TEXT *Julius Wiedemann*

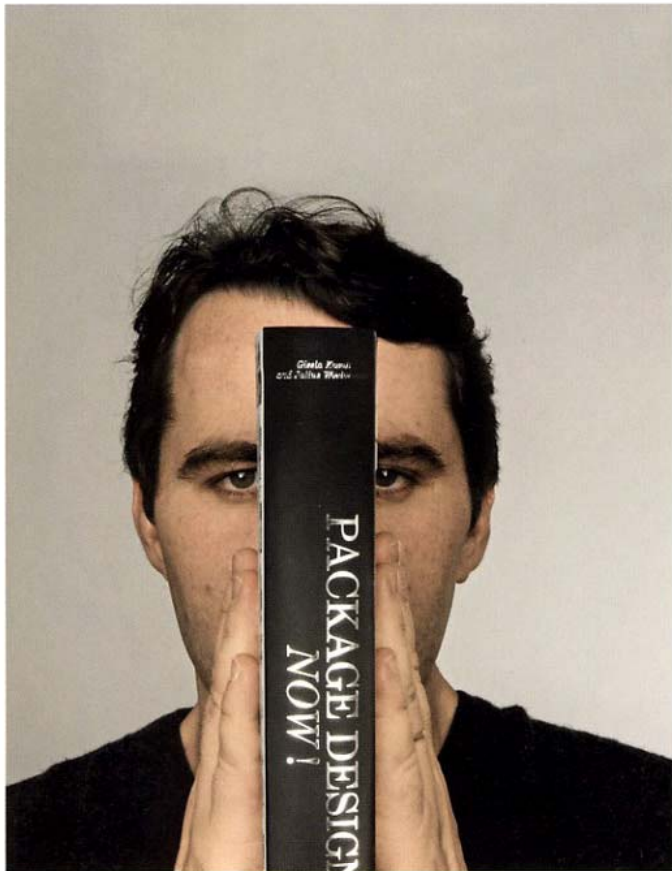
PHOTOS *From the book "Package Design Now"*

When I first landed in Japan in 1997, I kept thinking how I had to prepare myself to live there for the next three years, with all the challenges and potential adversities that would just pop up on a daily basis. As a designer, there was probably no better country in which to keep myself entertained in terms of new discoveries. And as a newcomer, I was also receiving lots of advice from people around me, specially my wife, who was doing her masters degree in design at Chiba University. So the best thing I could do was to embrace the opportunity to learn as much as I could, and I began immersing myself in all the things that couldn't possibly have been more different to Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, the city that I came from. I have always believed that language is a pathway to learning about culture, as it inherits the roots of a nation and the values of its people, as well as the transformations every culture undergoes over a period of time. It is what I call "*a dynamic expression of the culture*". All those things, from feelings to daily rules, from perception to understanding, and subliminal

messages within the social hierarchy; these are all embedded within the language code, both written and spoken, let alone the behavioural changes that occur when one expresses him or herself in the mother tongue.

However, as a new arrival to Japan, I soon realised that it wouldn't be easy for me to immerse myself in the culture from a linguistic point of view, as one can imagine. It would either take a very long time or perhaps would just remain as a gap in my 'understanding'. I therefore decided to concentrate my efforts on the issues of design and aesthetics, areas that have always interested me. Over time, my interests grew to a point that I decided to start collecting references of Japanese work on design and communication; this later resulted in a 600 page book entitled *Japanese Graphics Now*. An important goal for me was to try to capture the essence of the Japanese perception of and philosophy on beauty, appeal, experience, seduction, and all the things connected to design.

ADEYAKA Infiniti Magazine GALLERY



The man behind the book: Justus Wiedemann, media and design expert at the Taschen publishing house.

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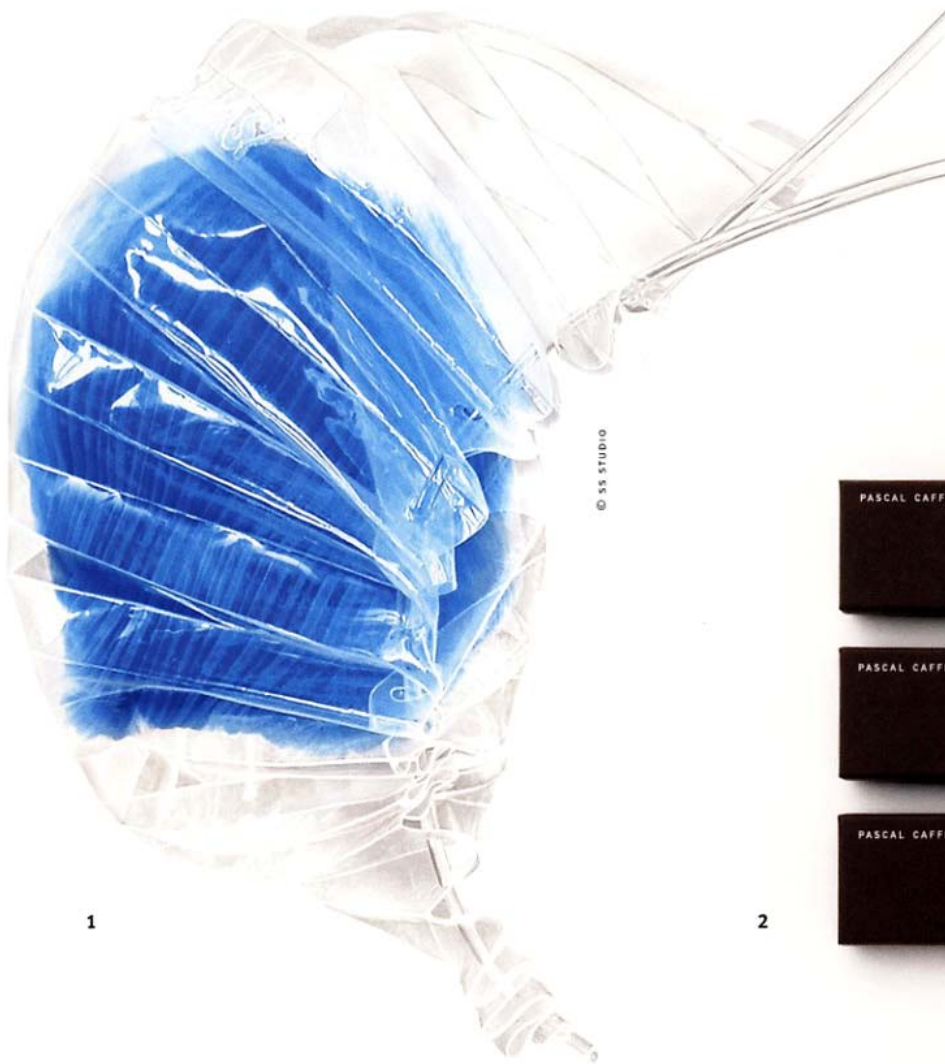
- 1 Wine carrier made of paper by Akio Okumura. © AKIO OKUMURA
- 2 Retail display for PET bottled green tea by agency Hakuodo. © SUNTORY
- 3 Haus fruit jelly by Akio Okumura. © AKIO OKUMURA
- 4 Generic paper wrapping package by Akio Okumura. © AKIO OKUMURA
- 5 Heap of melons in Tokyo supermarket, from 3 to 6 EUR a piece. They come protected, but without a box. © SADAO MAEKAWA
- 6 Issey Miyake L'eau bleue d'Issey perfume by Taku Satoh. © TAKU SATOH DESIGN OFFICE
- 7 Sake bottle by Akio Okumura. © AKIO OKUMURA

Among the myriad of things that could define Japanese culture, there are certain key features that both intrigued me and made me fall in love with the country and its people. As in many other countries, the first cultural discovery I made was the peaceful coexistence of contradictory behaviour, traditions and habits. In Japan, that side of the cultural description has to do with the intriguing cohabitation between the highly traditional old country and the most technologically oriented landscape on the planet. Japan's indigenous traditions contain inherent values that echo far back to the feudal period of its history, beautifully explained by Nitobe Inazo in his book *Bushido: The Soul of Japan*. Bushido, or the "Way of the Warrior", is a Japanese code of conduct that describes the life of the samurai. It originated from their moral code and stresses the precepts of frugality, loyalty, chivalry, martial arts mastery and honour unto death. Born of two main religious and philosophical influences, the violent existence of the samurai has been shaped by the wisdom and serenity of Confucianism and Buddhism. This pretty much describes and defines the Zen culture of Japan, and its visual omnipresence in the gardens and temples of Kyoto as well as cosmetic package designs, and so many other things that make us feel calm, polite, serene, and contemplative, yet powerful and mysterious.

The other side of Japan is a country that works 24/7 and doesn't rest for a split second; where the frenetic rhythm of workers in Tokyo create a daily flow of 11 million people travelling on the Yamanote line alone (one of the busiest of Tokyo's many subway routes); and where one million pedestrians traverse the Shibuya crossing every day (again, just one of the countless big crossings in the capital). This Japan is where the visual impact of its giant digital screens is truly overwhelming. All this chaos and visual density can be expressed in places like Akihabara, Tokyo's electronics district, with its hundreds of colourfully backlit stores that form an exciting illuminated pattern; or in Harajuku, where youths dress up in their subcultural groups and hang out at weekends. Indeed, Japan's latent playfulness can be observed all around the country, and in many of its entertainment industries, such as computer games, comics and anime.

In summary, Japan has a strong visual culture, no matter if it is present within the Zen tranquillity or amidst its socio-urban chaos. And it is this very clash of cultural insights that has stimulated Japanese inventiveness to become a global leader in fashion, auto-making, design, robotics and electronics, whilst remaining a nation that appreciates and preserves the ancient way of drinking tea, wearing the kimono, and packing things. I call this the most perfect encounter of Zen and chaos. The

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'pleasurability' incorporated into Japanese design is particularly evident in cars. The characteristic lines that instantly differ from western automobiles create an immediate identity. However, it is not just about the visual aesthetics of the exterior and interior, it is the holistic pleasure factor that it offers when you drive one. The Japanese have conquered the world not simply by offering a means of efficient and reliable transportation, but by personifying their vehicles with their cultural essences and unique way of thinking. There is nothing more delightful than being a guest in Japan. They take you everywhere, make you try all the foods and dedicate all the time needed for good hospitality. When you are at a family's home, they also let you bathe first in the *Ofuro*, a traditional Japanese wood bath (something that shows their deep respect), ensuring you have an unforgettable experience. The most special cars will be imbued with all these nuances.

Japanese packaging design too incorporates these aforementioned values, depending on the type of packaging we are taking about. In

many cases, their multi-layered paper engineering seems to be just a re-interpretation of the kimono, which will add more or less status according to the number of layers put on a product. The more expensive and luxurious the product the more layers of wrapping paper or boxes one will have to open. Whilst denoting its value, this type of design will enhance the experience by imbuing it with mystery and surprise.

Omiyage is the art and culture of customary gifts, typically a box with nicely packed soaps, detergents, toilet paper, food and other goods. These "gift boxes" are also an explicit example of politeness, serenity and the social importance of wrapping things. Its strong virtue of valuing the effort rather than just results is reflected in the process in which someone discovers slowly, in an almost painful way, what the present will be. The art of *Origami* is a natural part of this process, with parents and grandparents teaching the folding techniques to kids from early ages, celebrating the tradition, the perfection, the patience, and the beautiful result. Taku Satoh, head

of a leading design studio in Tokyo describes Japanese products as “*delivering small, yet powerful*” portions of food as one of the main characteristics of the culture, where the difference can be felt in the smallest of details, such as the little drawings of the teacup that should face your partner when you drink the tea so that it can be appreciated by the other. Another national symbol in Japan would be the melon, carefully packed to reflect and justify the price the customer is paying. The *Densuke melon* from the island of Hokkaido is considered to be one of the sweetest, and with prices fetching between € 120 and € 200, can be purchased in a meticulously crafted wooden box or in a traditionally designed basket of knots.

I have long been fascinated as to how Japanese designers can maintain this balance of observing their traditional styles and values, whilst constantly being able to invent a completely new, colourful and playful approach. One day, whilst in conversation with Sayuri Shoji, a Japanese designer who runs a design consultancy with offices in both Tokyo and New York, I was surprised to discover how radically the creative process differs in the two countries. In the United States, companies have a clear marketing orientation, corporate colour coding, must-have words (and forbidden ones too), and brand identity for their packaging projects. In Japan however, companies like to listen more to their designers and partners, allowing them to have more freedom to experiment with their lack of constraints. In this way, one will always find the little snacks and soft drink cans full of characters like Pokémon, Dragon Ball, Astro Boy, and others. Their profound taste for dreams and mystery can easily be perceived in the animated films of the Oscar-winning director Hayao Miyazaki, such as *Princess Mononoke* and *Spirited Away*. To make things more exciting, Japanese manufacturers of food and goods also release a number of new products (or simply newly packaged products) every new season. Many of these are commonly thematic and flavoured with the seasons' flowers and fruits, and adorned with corresponding pictures, graphics, illustrations, logos, and new Pokémon-like characters. These vividly packaged products can be easily found in *Kombinis*, or convenience stores, where they carry a selection of the best-selling products ranging from pens and small gifts to sandwiches and candy bars. They are also stocked in vending machines known as *Jidohanbaiki*, which have their selection of available products periodically changed to meet the needs of new seasons. These countless machines are visible everywhere, on the sidewalks, shopping centres, subway and railway stations. This profusion of hot and cold drinks, soups and other kinds of food help you remember in which part of the year you are in. With images of snowflakes, cherry blossoms, cedar leaves, or any of the hundreds of seasonal symbols, these machines, and the packages contained within them, create a powerful microcosmic display for what is available at that time of year.



As with the language itself, Japanese packaging, in a sense, is a means of distributing all the cultural signifiers we know are related to the country. Last spring, the AIGA (American Institute of Graphic Arts) held an impressive exhibition at its New York headquarters called *Suupaa Pop: Package Design from Japan*, highlighting the country's incredible diversity in the field. The general perception we have in the West of Japanese packaging is perhaps more closely associated with the concept of Zen, as the praise for craft, clarity, precision and quality are always reflected; but as I realised on a personal level, Japanese packaging is more than this; it is almost like a three dimensional extension of their lifestyle, wisdom and culture.

- 1 Pleats please, limited edition shopping bag for Issey Miyake by Sayuri Studio. Hand scored polypropylene with vinyl tube.
- 2 Pascal Caffet for ±, a new brand that has taken the Japanese market by storm. Their wide range of products derive from chocolate bars and coffee makers to soccer mat and telephones. Its simple and straight forward packaging created by Taku Satoh go against most of the competitors' ones, but inherit the simplicity of all the Zen-stylized packages.
- 3 Candle 0015/0017 by Sayuri Studio, made of glass and clear acetate, Manufacturing process: Extrusion.

ADEYAKA Infinity Magazine GALLERY



Box for delivery
by designer Sayuri Shoji.

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JULIUS WIEDEMANN, 34, was born and raised in Brazil. After studying graphic design and marketing, he moved to Japan, where he worked in Tokyo as art editor for digital and design magazines. Since joining publishing house Taschen in 2001, he has been building up the design and media collection with titles such as "Japanese Graphics Now!" and the "Advertising Now" series among others. Having lived in four different countries, in three different continents, his main area of interest is the interaction between technology, culture and communication, topics on which he frequently lectures. Together with Gisela Kozak he recently published the book "Package Design Now!" an encyclopedic resource of top design and branding offices from all around the world. Wiedemann is currently based in Cambridge, UK, where he lives with his wife and their two children.

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Julius Wiedemann.

