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**ACT OF UNITY**

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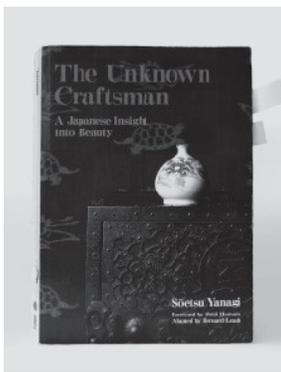
where 'beauty and ugliness are as yet unseparated'.

There can be no true beauty, then, outside that realm where beauty and ugliness have not yet begun to conflict with each other.

Soetsu Yanagi

## ACT OF UNITY

Tiziana Proietti



We tend to believe that the world we live in is composed of opposites and dualities – beautiful or ugly, affluent or impoverished, innovative or traditional, east or west, rational or emotional, high-tech or low-tech. Everything we experience is touched by the idea of an opposite element or concept that works as a filter for us to assign a value to the experienced object. Something expensive is mostly perceived as *not poor* and therefore good – perhaps because it is made from precious materials, by refined processes or carries a famous name. We spontaneously ascribe values to things and the environment surrounding us due to our preconceived notion of opposites, which we carefully build into a stratified system of thinking. However, the powerful essence of what we experience discloses itself only in the field between the two extremes of opposition – and therefore in a place equally distant from them both, where the definition of extremes does not exist at all. That middle way is the most fascinating and powerful realm of intuitive perception – or the ‘intuitive eye’ to use Soetsu Yanagi’s words – as the source of the most sensorial experience of the surrounding reality.

As Yanagi says, ‘True beauty exists in the realm where there is no distinction between the beautiful and the ugly, a realm that is described as “prior to beauty and ugliness” or as a state where “beauty and ugliness are as yet unseparated”. There can be no true beauty, then, outside that realm where beauty and ugliness have not yet begun to conflict with each other’<sup>1</sup>. Deeply rooted in the early secular Buddhist philosophy<sup>2</sup> that focuses on the human perception and cognition of external reality, this search beyond dualities fully trusts in the senses, but with the insight of considering the mind as a sense just like the other senses.

### The Middle Path

The artists and designers committed to the genuine act of making do not choose beauty to eliminate ugliness, and they do not fight against certain concepts to achieve or conquer their opposites. They are the ones disclosing that field in between, where the extremes become parts of a dialogue where one is essential to the existence of the other. This is the realm where the emotional and the rational blend, and where the mind joins the other senses as a

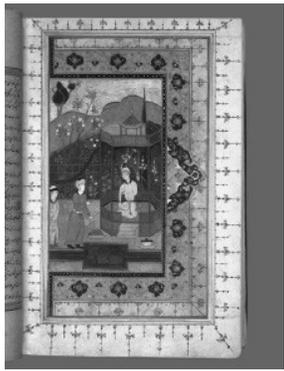
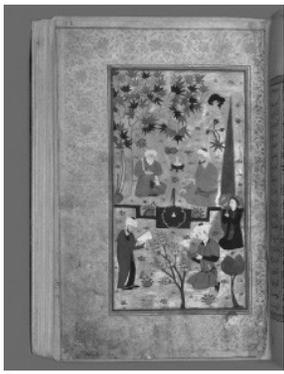
A, B Calligraphy by Soetsu Yanagi, ‘Beyond beauty and ugliness’ and ‘Today the sky is clear’, *The Unknown Craftsman. A Japanese Insight into Beauty*, Tokyo, New York: Kodansha International, 1989. Courtesy: Satyendra Pakhalé Archives, Amsterdam, NL.

1 Soetsu Yanagi, *The Unknown Craftsman. A Japanese Insight into Beauty*, Tokyo, JP; New York, USA: Kodansha International, 1989, p. 130.

2 The secular Buddhist philosophy was born in India, named in Pali as *Jhāna*, translated into Sanskrit as *Dhyāna* and transmitted to China, Vietnam and Korea as *Ch’an*, *Thien*, *Sōn* and *Zen* respectively, and finally to Japan.

In real existence  
there is only unity.

Rumi



sense in itself. The process of making, through which human beings modify the natural world to make it accessible to the senses and to inhabit it, is the strongest manifestation of this encounter.

Today, we often interpret the rational solution to a given design problem as embodying functionality and efficiency. But we often tend to forget that there is no rationality without emotion, and any necessity, rationally addressed, asks also for a sensorial solution. As human beings we acquire knowledge of the world from sensorial inputs that reach our brain, cultivating our senses. This act of knowing through experience is far from being merely rational. It is a mix that happens all at once in the process of perceiving. Similarly, the act of designing is an embodied multi-sensorial act where all the senses work silently together, just like riding a bicycle, to mention an action familiar to most of us. While sitting on the bicycle, positioning the feet and starting to pedal, we are simultaneously activating our sense of navigation, balance and location as well as our physical and most sensorial aptitudes by grasping the brakes, moving the legs in rhythm, looking around to keep the context connected to our movements, and more. All of this happens naturally after a process of learning and coordinating all those senses. Design practice, or ‘sensorial cultivation’, is similarly a perfectly balanced merger between the senses. The cultivation of this middle path between rational and emotional is vital to Pakhalé’s design practice.

### Only Unity

The poet Rumi said, ‘in real existence there is only unity’<sup>3</sup>. Pakhalé’s everyday activity and studio practice is committed to the edification of design culture as a creative act beyond dualism: beyond tradition as opposed to innovation; handmade as opposed to digital; or high-tech as opposed to low-tech. Design for him is not about making one component of the existent duality win over another. Only by going beyond this contention it is possible to look at materials, techniques and their expressions along with design processes and search for magical encounters. With this insight, the projects are developed in the day-to-day design practice at the studio. For Pakhalé, ‘design is an act of unity.’

When, in 2002, Pakhalé was commissioned by Tubes Radiatori Italy to design a radiator, he rethought the way we make our space comfortable in winter by making it warmer. While designing

c,d Jalal al-Din Rumi, *Masnavi*, illustrated manuscript. This epic poetic masterpiece in Persian by Rumi consists of six books of poetry that together amount to about 25,000 couplets. Ink, watercolour and gold on paper with leather binding, gift of Alexander Smith Cochran, 1913. Courtesy: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA.

3 Jalal-al Din Rumi, *Masnavi*, book four, 3829–3853, 1207–1273.

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the Add-On Radiator<sup>1</sup>, his objective was to conserve energy, minimize waste and optimize usability by rethinking the way the traditional radiator is mounted on a wall. The Add-On Radiator was conceptualized as an autonomous wall, with air passing through it, and both sides warming the space. At the same time, it creates a sensorial, comforting architectural space within a space; a new ambience and atmosphere. It is perfectly designed to address a basic human need in an innovative way. It is rationally thought out and comes from a tireless investigation into technology and materials, and at the same time is a piece charged with sensorial qualities, designed by engaging a thorough understanding of human senses. Such a design could only be created by going beyond dualities and preconceptions. Only by looking beyond conventions and current conditions could Pakhalé create an object like the Add-On Radiator.

### Equal Validity

At Pakhalé's studio, techniques are not romanticized or approached with any bias or preconceived notions. It is clear that *handmade* cannot be understood as opposite to *digital*, just as it cannot be idealized or dressed up in nostalgia. Human making has developed over centuries by means of numerous techniques in which both hand and tool play a role in the creation of the final object. A chisel, and even the material sculpted, collaborates with the hand in order to create a specific form. Even when we use digital tools, there is still a collaboration between hand and tool. Every tool has a specific merit in the way it contributes to the process and all tools are equally valid. Handmade and digital tools are available to the contemporary world and by using them wisely, objects can be made that address our broadest needs and are utilitarian, physical, sensorial, and intellectual. The resulting objects embody a sense of human warmth without compromising utility. In the same way there is no stratification of values to be assigned to materials, poor or rich, humble or precious. Every material is noble and valid as long as it is not toxic. The value comes from the expressiveness of the object that successfully meets the properties of the material and the applied techniques.

The design challenges are far too complex and deeply existential to be dealt with solely in a conceptualized, rational manner. It is subtly sophisticated emotion, interwoven with rational thought and action, that creates deeply sensorial work.

E,F Add-On Radiator that can be either mounted on the wall or recessed in the wall, creating a space divider and allowing air to pass through it for more effective heating. Courtesy: Tubes Radiatori, IT.

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