

Artesanías vs Design: Unveiling Design Hegemonies over Traditional Crafts in Chile.

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Abstract | This contribution critically follows design as a component for economic and cultural production interwoven with craftsmanship in Chile, putting in tension the promotion of modern design in 'artesanías' as a tool for development that has been encouraged in the country and the region via discourses of modernity, growth and progress. From these perspectives, and following UNESCO's vision of human development, diverse Chilean institutions have considered the design discipline to innovate among the cultural industries, mainly in crafts, since design suppose to assist, improve and stimulate the consumption of artisanal production. However, the interactions between designers and artisans remain controversial since the latter has firmly rejected their need for professional design in recent encounters. Against this background, this contribution traces frictions in discourses and different design interventions over crafts deployed in Chile after the 1990s, mainly through the analysis of press clips from the *Programa de Artesanía UC* archive. At the same time, and based on an ethnographic approach, it examines the extent of the modern design interventions in the village of Pomaire, a relevant community of pottery makers in the country that has been associated with artisanal tradition and with national identity. From this case study and based on the perception of the artisans about design interventions, this paper addresses two hegemonic paths through which modern design operates in artisanal production, assessing how, through the use of historic, aesthetics and manufacturing aspects, design for crafts can be related to an 'economy of enrichment' that turns cultural production into commodities.

Keywords: hegemonies, craftsmanship, development, tradition, innovation

The recent social protests that have taken place throughout Chile –a South American model of neoliberal economic success— have been perceived as a critique of the social and environmental damages of the current economic and political system (Rodríguez 2020; Aguirre and Rivera 2020, 2). The popular movements question the capitalist exploitation of resources justified by an economic model associated with the promises of modernisation and development. Thus, among other issues, it appears that these movements recognise the failure of the once promised developmental project that has been for long associated with growth, progress and industrialism, a project that have been very much related to the discipline of design in different ways.

The connection between design and the development project was significant in South America, where design was perceived as a tool to encourage the processes of industrialisation by incorporating modern and rationalist parameters to the productive industry (Escobar 1995; Vallejos Fabres 2016; Clarke 2016). The idea of design was entangled with modernity and supposed to contribute to the aspirations of industrialisation and progress of this apparently underdeveloped region. As stated by the designer Gui Bonsiepe, the history of design in Latin America dates back to the 1960s, when ministries of technology, industries or cooperation and development centres that stimulated the processes of industrialisation and economic developmentalism started to formulate design training programmes (Bonsiepe 1985, 1977). In this context, also the Chilean governments attempted to encourage the technological development of the small and medium industries by searching for consultancy of designers attached to modern and rational design principles (Portal Carrasco, 2016). However, already in the 1990s, Bonsiepe recognised the failure to integrate design into the region's industrial production since, in general terms, the discipline remained barely attached to industries, framed mainly in the academic context and disconnected from the professional world (Bonsiepe 1990, 131-134).

This breach between design and industry in Chile became stronger after the consolidation of the neoliberal economic orientation in the country, which made it extremely complex for producers to compete with the global market. In the face of this weakened productive scenario (Gatica Barros 1989; Ahumada 2019), there was a reconsideration of the Western narrative of industrialisation in which non-industrial design and small scale production were often marginalised. Thus, as I will disentangle below, some perspectives started to position design as a supportive discipline for crafts in the country and in the Southern region, as a discipline that could add value to handmade objects, mainly through the commodification of artisanal production.

Against this background, this paper critically reviews different discourses about applying modern and professional design in artisanal production as a tool for development in Chile, mainly through different documents and press clips contained in the Archive of the Catholic University in Chile (UC). This revision considers a period between the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s because it is representative of the consolidation of design with crafts in the country, which is reflected on the implementation of various policies and projects associated with UNESCO's vision of human development.

To assess the implication of these 'design for crafts' visions in Chile, I present research conducted in the community of Pomaire, where more than 230 families are related to pottery making and where artisanal production is the primary revenue of its inhabitants. This community of artisans transited a path between being regarded as 'traditional and representative' of the national *artesanía* (Lago 1955, 301; 1985, 18) to being considered as an aberration of the tradition by the Chilean establishment (*Diario La Época* 1987; *Las Últimas Noticias* 1988), due to the permanent incorporation of global aesthetics trends and mechanical tools in the making of their products. From the different interviews conducted in the village with artisans and other actors involved in the clay circuit, and through observations about the making process, I examine certain perspectives expressed by Pomairean artisans. From there, I recognise different paths through which professional design has operated using the notion of development, establishing how some institutions and programmes have generated hierarchical paths of design over crafts in this community.

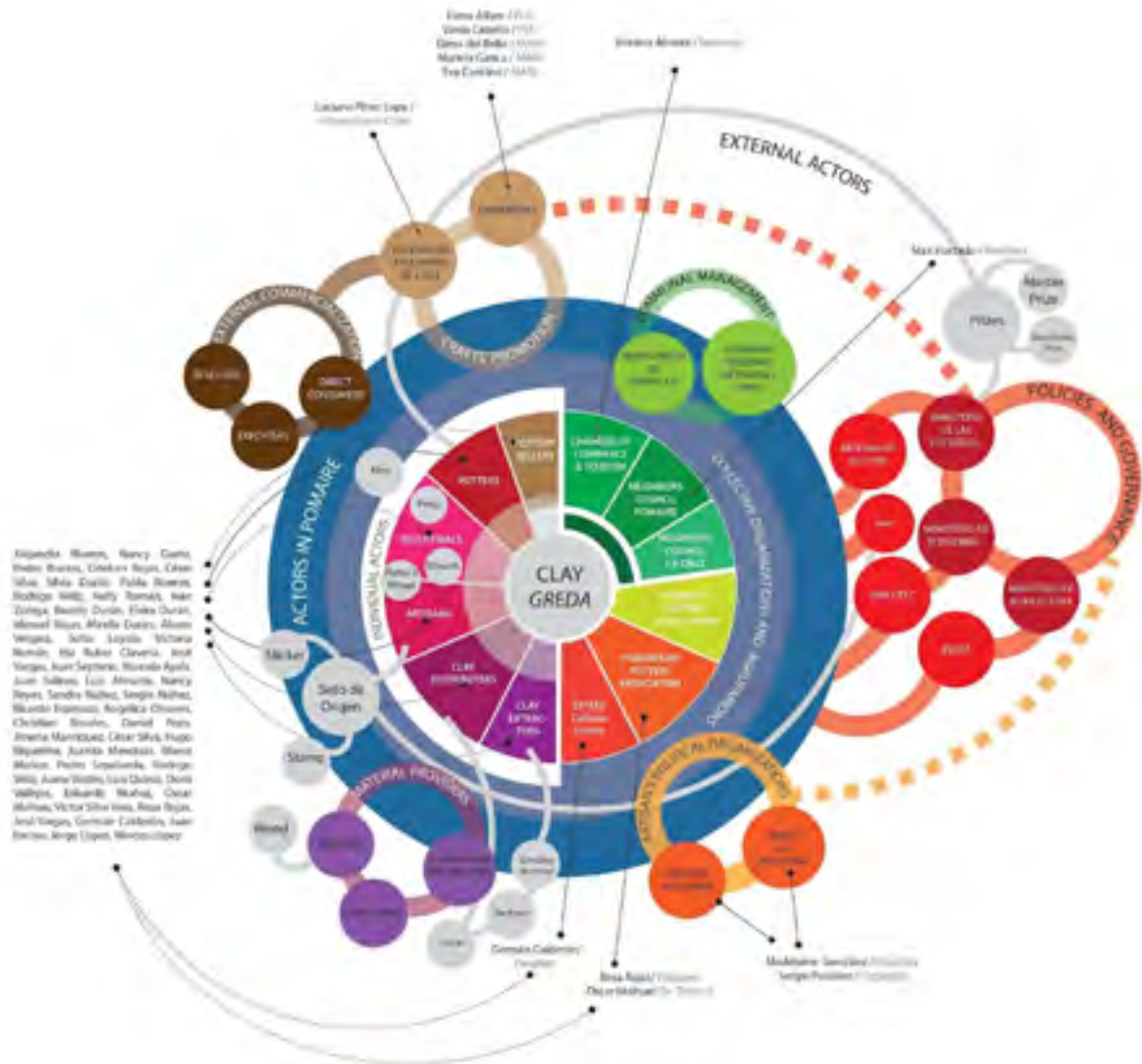


Figure 1. Diagram of Actors connected to the pottery production of Pomaire (Source: Elaborated by the author).

2. Design, Crafts and Human Development

While crafts or *artesanías* have been relevant in South America for being considered as significant cultural expressions and as means to improve social, cultural, and economic conditions, it was not until the 1990s that the strategies to incorporate design into craft production as a tool for increasing commercialisation started to be considered by institutional visions throughout the region. This integration pointed mainly to fight the decrease in the western demand for artisanal objects and was strengthened by the rise of the concept of 'human development', a notion that aimed to expand the richness of human life, focused on people, on their opportunities and choices (UNDP n.d.).

In the light of this concept, traditional crafts or *artesanías* appeared as essential to empower human development, but at the same time, they were perceived as endangered. Therefore, there was a path open to incorporate design as a strategy for safeguarding artisanal production and the generation of new handmade products with added value (Rodríguez Acosta 2002, p.72-74). Thus, there was an opening for altering some artisanal expressions and heritage by applying mediated innovation, accepting the figure of the designer as a translator of the traditional to more contemporary production.

This link between design and crafts appeared as a *fruitful liaison* in Chile during the 1990s when the Traditional Craft Exhibition –organised since 1974 by the *Programa de Artesanía*, hosted on the School of Design of the UC– hired designers to promote traditional objects in modern spaces. This fair encouraged the use of handcrafted products in interior design, promoting their consumption as

decorative pieces; this was a novelty because, as the designer Mariana Kaplun expressed, people did not consider using traditional artisanal objects as ornaments in their houses before this exhibition (Kaplun in Yunis 1994). The fair also introduced the concept of 'innovation with artisanship', a concept perceived by the designer Luis Rodríguez as an opportunity to generate Chilean quality objects for exportation, recognising the potential integration between design and crafts as a way to overcome low prices in the exportation of crafts and design products (Rodríguez in Yunis 1994).



Figure 2. The Traditional Craft Exhibition of the Bustamante Park in 1978 (left). The artisan Estelvina Gaete and her 'cocinillas' from Pomaire (right) (Source: Collection 'Muestra de Artesanía Tradicional 1978' Photo Archive from the Programa de Artesanía UC).

Later, aspiring to innovate on the quality and creativity of the pieces, the UC developed the *Programa de Integración de Diseño y Artesanía* with the support of the foundation *Artesanías de Chile*. The premise of the project was that traditional objects could be adapted to contemporary demands through design. As stated by the organisers in an article published in the *El Mercurio newspaper*, the programme aspired to perfect the final products, their functionality, modes of production, and to integrate design in handcrafted creation (Covarrubias 1999).

However, it was during the first decade of the 2000s when the association between crafts and design was systematically promoted through diverse institutions and projects in Chile (UNESCO 2005; Rodríguez Acosta 2002; UNESCO 2009), that, aligned with the UNESCO's perspective of development, searched for the integrative and globalized visions that designers could incorporate to the traditional objects. Therefore, design for crafts supposed to:

'Introduce systematic harmony between demand, needs, production, innovation, consumption, waste, recycling, with a criteria of sustainable development and considering the preservations of heritages and identities.' (Gómez Pozo 2009)

This tendency for the use of design contributed to establishing *artesanías* beyond a heritage associated to social identity, rurality, and small scale production, and located crafts as a relevant sector for economic growth and cultural valuation through innovation in the creative industries (CNCA 2014), which was also stimulated on the policies for design and crafts sectors (CNCA 2017a, 2017b).

On the one hand, *artesanías* with guided design interventions could improve sales by multiplying the functions and aesthetic components of the artisanal objects, and enhance production through the use of design methods for management and marketing. On the other hand, craft techniques and aesthetics supposed to position design objects in new markets looking for products with manual imprints, or artisanal techniques.

But while design for crafts became associated with profit, enterprise, economic growth and to support artisanal production, at some point in Chile, and also in an international level, it became perceived as an hegemonic mode to integrate the modern, productive and aesthetic values of design in the chains of traditional production (CNCA, 2017c, p.3-4). Furthermore, the methods of collaboration between designers and artisans started to arise harsh criticism from the perspective of the artisans, as we can see in the discussions for the elaboration of the last Chilean 'policy of *artesanías*', in which artisans highlighted that their association with other professionals in the field of art and design was hierarchical, often relegated to labour and excluded from the creative processes or authorship (CNCA 2016).

3. Design for Crafts in Pomaire

As described in the previous part of this article, design for *artesanías* was perceived as relevant to achieve more outstanding sales and promotion, while for design, the craft techniques supposed to expand design objects to new markets looking for products with the artisanal imprints, methods or techniques (CNCA, 2014, p. 114, 222). Thus, some programs developed in Chile encouraged the connection between design and crafts through aesthetic and technical support, innovation and development (CNCA, 2011a).

In 2011, a pilot design project organised by the Service of Technical Cooperation dependent on the Ministry of Economy, Development and Tourism (SERCOTEC), together with Pro-Chile, the office for export promotion, and the design magazine ED, was carried out in Pomaire as a concrete experience following these tendencies to empower *artesanías* with design. In the form of a contest, this programme attempted to incorporate aesthetic and productive design components into traditional production by inviting 18 designers, architects, and artists to work together with artisans. They formed pairs to create a product based on design innovation mixing traditional techniques that sought first, to add value to craftsmanship, second, to transform artisans into entrepreneurs and finally, to promote -through design- Pomairean artisanal production in international markets. From the perspective of SERCOTEC, one of the project's goals was:

'To apply business and commercial training among the artisans, so they become 'more entrepreneurial' when facing the challenges of international markets for selling their products.' (Uriarte in SERCOTEC 2011)

In the same line, the organisers from Pro-Chile expressed how significant was the incorporation of design in craft when targeting international markets. This approach towards design was emphasised by representatives of the ED magazine, who declared how satisfied they were after the project:

'The expertise [of the magazine] is in the world of design, and we have managed to bring our expertise to a segment of the population that desperately cries out loud for it; that is to say, the artisans of Pomaire, to add value to their products.' (Urenda in SERCOTEC, 2011)

Although the competition established a bond between the pairs, there was an inequality in the distribution of the prizes, favouring the professionals with bigger prizes, and stipulating the methods for the use of the resources only in the case of the artisans, who had to follow the frames of an institutional programme dictated by the technical cooperation service (Pro-pyme, 2010).

Therefore, the project *CREA Diseña para Pomaire* sheds some light on the hierarchies between professionals and artisans, showing that even when some initiatives tried

to encourage collaboration among disciplines by empowering creativity, innovation and valuation of the artisanal production, a clear distinction between designers, architects or artists and artisans existed. Regarding the programme mentioned above, these distinctions, hierarchies or even design hegemonies over crafts appear, for example, on the unequal distribution of the prizes that benefited projective professionals above makers.

In this case, the expectation of generating successful interventions through professional design by the assistance of experts to artisan was also naïve. The project was oriented to innovate and expand the commercialisation channels of artisans, but most of the designed pieces were never reproduced. In this regard, it was probably expected that designers, artists and architects could provide a more refined projection of the objects, integrating aesthetics components for uplifting the more common and ordinary shapes developed in the town. These professionals had the experience of creating pieces for more 'elevated' audiences and consumers. They had the task of combining design in the pottery of Pomaire since, as quoted above, the organisers of the contest expressed that 'in international markets, design is practically the only thing that sells' (de Vicente in SERCOTEC 2011).

The conflict around the project presented by artisans through the interviews conducted in the village is that the designed pieces did not achieve continuity in the production of Pomaire. The pottery makers pointed out that their consumers, in general terms, did not appreciate the added work and the design that those pieces had. Juana Mendoza –an outstanding artisan of the town– expressed:

'Only once a lady came asking for the designer's piece, called the O! plate 'do you have the O! plate?', only once, but never again, what I sell is traditional pottery, like animal figures, nobody buys that plate.' (Juanita Mendoza, interviewed by author, December 19, 2019)

Thus, far faced with the quest to increase productivity and elevated aesthetics inputs for commercialisation, the promise of design to add value –like the vision promoted by SERCOTEC, Pro-Chile and ED– has not achieved the goal of marketing expansion and price increase. During the fieldwork, 40 artisans interviewed declared not to export, and two mentioned having had bad experiences selling to international markets in the past due to the complexities of delivering and being paid (Salgado Cofré 2021). Other artisans have participated in international fairs and exhibitions displaying their pieces, but in these events the objectives are not related to incorporate their products into reliable and sustained international commercialisation channels, but are presented as symbolic of the Chilean identity and artisanal excellence.

In addition, other program related to the promotion of crafts in Pomaire in which design has intended to contribute by applying innovation, marketing and valorisation strategies, is the *Sello de Origen* or Designation of Origin: a distinction given to the pottery production of the village by the Ministry of Economy, Development and Tourism and the National Institute for the Industrial Property (INAPI). This recognition aims to promote and preserve this particular form of traditional manufacturing while strengthening the union in the territorial community, favouring the economic development of small producers (INAPI n.d.). This category given by INAPI to the pottery production of the town can be considered as one of the tools promoted by the state for incrementing the value of the pottery production by emphasizing its singularity based on its territorial identity and traditionality.



Figure 3. Pieces produced by the artisan Rosa Rojas, president of the Traditional Potters association, with the 'Sello de Origen' stickers. (Source: Photographed by the author)

However, through the fieldwork observations and interviews conducted in Pomare, it was possible to prove that many artisans do not apply the stamps or stickers with the denomination of origin in their pieces for different reasons. On the one hand, some artisans declared that the stamping process was complex and demanded more time, that they preferred to invest in making more pieces. On the other hand, some artisans do not stamp the pieces because they do not control or participate in the whole production process, so they feel that they cannot use the *Sello*. Many artisans that work in specific stages of pottery making do not acknowledge authorship because the final piece is the result of the interaction of many hands. In this production chain, some artisans consider that only those that shape and model the pieces are the real authors; others believe that the composition of the pieces and finishing processes are the more relevant tasks, while other artisans hold that authorship can only be claimed by those who perform all the process of transformation of the material (Salgado Cofré 2021).

4. Design for Crafts and the Exploitation of Value

Based on the previous arguments, I identify two hegemonic paths in which modern design, encouraged by institutional perspectives and instruments, has operated in Chilean artisanal production, paths that are also identified in Pomaire's pottery interventions.

On the one hand, there is a path towards innovation in which design operates as a modern discipline that can help or assist artisans by incorporating their crafts of excellence to designed objects, that is to say, objects designed with a twist towards innovation, following a modern aesthetic provided by the designers, that are manufactured by artisans using their know-how and their skills. This category has operated in Pomaire through aesthetic innovation and design ideas for economic development, supported mainly by institutions that promote innovation strategies and economic added value through programs like *CREA Diseña para Pomaire*.

On the other hand, there is a way in which design adds value to artisanal pieces by creating references to the past and traditionality through narratives that serve to situate traditional objects within a higher market. In this line, professional design discipline supports the construction of images and ideas that promote craft objects as unique, of quality, and even luxury goods to insert them in more wealthy circuits of commercialisation. This category operates in Pomaire by defining which techniques and pieces belong to the original tradition developed in the village, selecting objects that deserve to be displayed and distributed in wealthier marketing spaces based on authenticity, singularity and traditionality. Different to this institutionalised design perspective of valuation of the tradition, the artisans' notions of tradition are very heterogeneous and have diverse values and meanings: while some artisans associate tradition with the production space or the origin of the material, others associate it with the shapes, techniques, or transmission processes for the making.

Both paths mentioned above, generally contribute to defining the objects' value based on how closely they are to the parameters of traditionality and innovation dictated by the national and international craft *establishment*, aiming to trigger an increase in the prices of the products made by artisans. In many cases, they aim to integrate crafts in global frameworks of commercialisation; however, this integration has proven to be conflictive if there is an uncontrolled growth in the demand for products, generating overexploitation of resources and people (Salgado Cofré and Vanwambeke 2021). As shown in the previous parts of this paper, design for internationalisation also leads to positioning artisanal objects as luxury items with added value sustained in their handmade status, empowering conditions such as authenticity, uniqueness and excellence.

Therefore, design through its association with crafts has been perceived as a conducting force for the economic development of *artesanías*, usually through marketing programmes that focus on increasing the price of the objects as cultural commodities, which are valued by the rationales and aesthetic of a small elite minority. Some examples of this commodification can be observed in how products are represented in elite marketing circuits following contemporary trends, as done by the foundation *Artesanías de Chile* or as expected by Pro-Chile. The contemporary aesthetics used by *Artesanías de Chile* for selling traditional craft products point towards different consumers than those from the popular marketing circuits that artisans have. Instead, it makes use of design and western global fashion trends, creating promotional campaigns similar to those conducted, among others, by *Artesanías de Colombia* or Crafts Council Nederland, that intend to present craft objects with 'a sense for aesthetics' (Crafts Council Nederland, n.d.).

These strategies for safeguarding, promoting and increasing crafts prices, that appears to be those taken by some Chilean institutions, can be seen through the lenses of what sociologists Arnaud Esquerre and Luc Boltanski describe as the 'economy of enrichment', a term that concerns:

'The forms of wealth creation that are based on an economic exploitation of the past, in the form of craft, heritage, tradition, identity or, more largely, culture.' (Boltanski and Esquerre 2015, p. 76)

These forms relate to increasing the value of objects or material through a model of worth based on the 'enrichment of legacy and uniqueness'. Although the work of

these authors focuses on the so-called 'luxury' products built through big brands projects in France, there are resemblances between the discourses and instruments used to position this kind of product in the market and those used by some crafts programmes in Chile, that emphasise the craft objects properties of uniqueness, quality and authenticity.

The study of these sociologists noticed a switch in the focus of value in standardised industrial goods towards singularised goods produced mostly for wealthy people (Boltanski and Esquerre 2015, 81), what they call a value-oriented enrichment economy, in which they analyse forms of value creation such as the 'collection form'. The 'collection form', similar to the instruments of the *Sello de Origen*, relies on authenticity and on where something was produced, a form that:

'Preserve a sense of truthfulness and authenticity, protecting it from the impersonal reign of standardisation, praising the love of vintage and the attachment to roots.' (Fabian Muniesa in Boltanski and Esquerre 2015, 81).

However, there are controversies in Pomaire around this 'collection' form related to a western tendency that promotes singularity, authenticity and tradition in artisanal production to increase the prices of products. The controversies appear because this kind of promotion proposes a narrow view of authorship and tradition, excluding certain realities of artisanal production, like the use of mechanised tools, the standardisation of some processes within the community, the more massive amount of production, and the fact that many artisans work on parts of the final pieces, rather than having the complete control over the final product.

Consequently, and as proven in this article, institutional design interventions for the commercial development of Pomaire, oriented to more aesthetic approaches and more exclusive marketing channels for customers with higher purchasing capability than those who go to the village, have not delivered the expected results concerning the potential growth of commercialisation. Moreover, when local know-how is standardised and mechanised, it is disqualified from tradition and treated as an aberration.



Figure 4. The artisan Alejandra Riveros polishes grills with her husband, Manuel Vergara. (Source: Photographed by the author)

Against this background, it is fundamental to recognise that the commercialisation channels for the pottery of Pomaire remain significant in the village, primarily by providing large quantities of pots for restaurants and hotels or selling to independent costumers, like tourists. Despite the fact that there is a growing competition between Pomaire's pottery production and other industrial imported goods or plaster made imitations traded in the same spaces, the production and commercialisation of handmade clay objects remain the fundamental activity of the village. This resistance indicates that artisans, through the constant design of their products, their means of production and the organisation of the processes, have overcome different difficulties, maintaining solid commerce that is oriented to the local market.

Therefore, it is through these very alterations or reconstruction of the scaffolds of the past, authenticity, authorship, and excellence, that Pomaire's craftsmanship and other artisanal expressions continue to be consumed by the common public. The rustic, diverse and customised clay pots that have been considered by some institutions as an abomination to design and tradition –that various artisans in the village replicate– are bought by a diversity of clients. Therefore, it appears that this more flexible approach to design taken by the artisans, not the one performed by professional design interventions, have allowed the sustainability and continuity of the pottery-making tradition in the village.

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