

DESIGN DNA



LEFT TO RIGHT
 TOP ROW / ALESSI JUICY SALIF PHILIPPE STARCK, GEORG JENSEN WAVE STEVE MCGUGAN, F!NK F!NK JUG ROBERT FOSTER
 MIDDLE ROW / ALESSI ANNA G ALESSANDRO MENDINI, F!NK JUNIOR SQUASH ROBERT FOSTER, GEORG JENSEN QUACK MARIA BERNTSEN
 BOTTOM ROW / GEORG JENSEN COBRA CONSTANTIN WORTMANN, ALESSI FRUIT LOOP LISA VINCITORIO, ALESSI KETTLE MICHAEL GRAVES

Car manufacturers have long valued their own design DNA as a vital component that helps define the brand. Marques like Maserati continue to inject a degree of design familiarity into every new product to maintain an instantly recognisable aesthetic. But for makers of luxury lifestyle homewares who produce a vast and varied product range and outsource their designs for new products to an array of individual designers from around the world, it is not always an easy process to maintain a consistency in design that denotes the brand. **Tracey Clement** looks at two global luxury lifestyle brands, Danish firm Georg Jensen and the Italian design giant Alessi, and local internationally successful firm Fink Design, to discover how they develop, build and maintain a style that gives the brands immediate recognition

GEORG JENSEN VIVIANNA
 VIVIANNA TORUN BÜLOW-HÜBE



Georg Jensen, Alessi and F!NK. At first glance, these three well-respected firms seem to have very little in common. For a start, despite their international profiles, they all seem inextricably tied to nationality, seeming quintessentially Danish, Italian and Australian respectively. But perhaps this is a similarity after all, as each company has a clearly defined identity.

Georg Jensen, Alessi and F!NK all have that elusive X-factor, a distinctive design DNA that unites the work of multiple talented designers into a cohesive and successful brand. What strategies do their Creative Directors use? Do they lay down strict design parameters and enforce long lists of draconian rules to ensure each new product suits the range? It seems the opposite is true.

As a brand, Danish company Georg Jensen has well and truly withstood the test of time with the eponymous company having been founded in 1904. It quickly became an international concern and these days, the name Georg Jensen is synonymous with the sleek, sinuous and sturdy craftsmanship we expect from Scandinavian design. Todd Bracher, the company's Creative Director since May 2009, describes the exclusive Georg Jensen look and feel as 'Organic, natural, poetic; very much like a classical dancer.'

Over a history spanning more than a century, this style has been honed to perfection by a wide range of designers, from pioneers of Danish modernism such as Henning Koppel, Arne Jacobsen and Vivianna Torun Bülow-Hübe, whose bangle watch has become a true design icon, to a new generation of globally mobile design stars like Karim Rashid and Bracher himself. Georg Jensen has worked with nearly 100 different designers, yet the brand retains a unique identity by relying on emotion and instinct.

Bracher, an American industrial designer trained at the Pratt Institute in New York before being drawn to Copenhagen to study at Denmark's Design School, has a passion for Danish design and a deep respect for the Georg Jensen legacy. But he is also looking to the future.

'We need to see our brand in the light of today and tomorrow, while learning from the past... We are exploring new materials, new contexts, new markets; essentially an evolution of the brand DNA,' Bracher says.

As a company, Georg Jensen is building on its traditional strengths in jewellery and silversmithing to become an internationally respected luxury lifestyle brand with an extensive range of products. As Bracher explains, during this transition:



ALESSI JUICY SALIF PHILIPPE STARCK

GEORG JENSEN WAVE STEVE MCGUGAN



'For us to maintain brand coherence we must define what the heart must feel and the mind think and the rest will follow.'

To this end, Bracher has spent his first year as Creative Director working with Danish design company OeO to develop tools to help convey his overarching vision. But maintaining an identity as complex and nuanced as Georg Jensen's cannot be achieved by merely following a series of prescribed strategies. Like Georg Jensen before him, Bracher relies on gut instinct to know when a new designer will suit the company.

'The brand DNA is built naturally in the creative force and when we catch the right feeling with a designer we know they are right.' And, despite his demanding role as Creative Director, Bracher is still designing new products for Georg Jensen, saying, 'In some cases it is easier for me to lead by example.'

Giovanni Alessi founded his firm in 1921 to manufacture finely crafted metal tableware and household objects. Nearly 90 years later, the now famous Italian company is still a family affair. His son Carlo began contributing designs in the mid 1930s and, in 2000, his great grandson Matteo became the first member of the clan's fourth generation to join the firm. But according to Susan Cohn, who in 1990 became both the first Australian and the first woman to design for Alessi, the distinctive design DNA of the company we know today is a reflection of the dedication and restless curiosity of Giovanni's grandson Alberto who has been managing its design direction since the early 1970s.

'Alberto is passionate about tableware. He is particularly interested in playing, in pushing things, in never standing still... Alessi take risks, it's not always about making money,' Cohn says.

Alberto's willingness to take risks may be what unites an eclectic selection of products by designers as diverse as Michael Graves, Ron Arad and Philippe Starck into a cohesive brand known for its light hearted humour and playful practicality. Alessi certainly doesn't constrain its designers by giving them a strict brief to work to. As Alberto explains: 'Designers are free to express themselves and use their own language and approach.'

Lisa Vincitorio, who in 2005 became the youngest Australian to join the Alessi stable, experienced this freedom.

'I've been fortunate in having the opportunity to express my artistic flair by submitting pieces that define my personality and emotions... No one described their philosophy to me,' she says.

Instead it was more a case of a mutual recognition: Vincitorio's *Fruit Loop* bowl and *Zucch* sugar pourer had a particular attitude that suited the Alessi range.

As Alberto insists: 'We don't have, nor do we want to have, a 'style': the red wire that keeps together all our products is instead the cultural project that's behind the company's activity.' For Alessi, this project is 'tireless research and experimentation' into the possibilities of the applied arts, or as he says, quoting Starck, '*Alessi est un marchand de bonheur. Alessi sells joy.*'

Internationally acclaimed local brand F!NK has a unique regional flavour. Since it hit the shelves in 1994, the F!NK jug, has become a genuine Australian design classic. There is something recognisable in the bright colours, irreverent use of materials and techniques and cheeky humour of the F!NK range of homewares, jewellery and lights. Some F!NK products are deliberately squashed, others are constructed using explosives; the range seems to embody the familiar characteristics



of an Australian larrikin.

F!NK is the brainchild of Canberra-based metalsmith Robert Foster. And while the product range includes ideas generated by more than half a dozen other local designers as well as his own, the brand's distinctive style is driven by Foster's passion for anodised aluminium and his personal design philosophy.

As he explains: 'I firmly believe that there is too much junk out there.'

F!NK was conceived as a way of presenting a home-grown alternative. Foster looks for designs that have 'something that will really add to the world.' In order to become a F!NK product, new designs must have something innovative to offer either aesthetically, technically or in their utilitarian purpose. So while F!NK's designers aren't given a design brief, as Foster says: 'by the sheer nature of meeting these prerequisites, a work develops which has recognisable F!NK qualities.'

Collaboration is another key to the cohesiveness of the F!NK range. Foster has mentored many of the designers he works with, such as Sean Booth and Oliver Smith, and he works closely with most of the designers who come through the workshop. Foster understands that this method of



working can be a win-win scenario.

'It introduces new ideas to me and to F!NK and offers up-and-coming designers the opportunity to learn about production, to extend their minds and to learn new skills... It helps support the whole industry,' he says.

This strategy allows for a cross fertilisation of ideas and access to specialised areas of knowledge, such as Elisabeth Kelly and Scott Chaseling's expertise with glass and Remi Verchot's proficiency with wood. As Foster also acknowledges, the collaborative process itself 'can entertain a certain sensibility', a distinctive element which is clearly evident in the F!NK range.

Georg Jensen, Alessi and F!NK have each carved out a unique place in the highly competitive world of design. As you might expect from three such distinctive brands, the men leading the creative direction of each company have their own idiosyncratic ways of working with their talented designers in order to nurture their brand's DNA and keep it evolving and fresh. But they also share certain strategies; they utilise passion, intuition and a desire for innovation. ♣

www.georgjensen.com.au

www.alessi.com

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