

## ***Memories by measure? Mediating the home textiles of Georg Jensen Damask***

### **abstract**

Georg Jensen Damask, Denmark, is a good case both to study the transition of designer roles in production and marketing in current design culture and the status of home textile products in design history and life style media. Tablecloths of high quality are often part of family history and in some aspects the very stuff that memories are made of. But as part of design culture they mostly drown in the media focus on designer icons, names and aesthetic objects for daily life. This paper follows some of the challenges Guy Julier points out to the study of design culture in 'mediations' and 'density' (Julier 2014) and describes and discusses how the new owners of Georg Jensen Damask have to re-perform the old brand heritage with regard to new time dynamics of product categories, with a new focus on designer (or rather architect) names, with the use of product, rather than textile designers and with a new density of visual reference to other design categories, to icons and brands. The case shows substantial changes in 'designer culture' with the 'Rise of Brands' (Moor 2007) where 'everything is media'; and the firm has engaged with industrial designers and graphic designers. But Georg Jensen Damask shows also to be a special case, because home textiles are often subordinated other interior design objects and are hard to brand in this discreteness. Neither does textile designers often reach headlines in design histories or in life style media. The materiality of the tablecloths and memory of the grand family celebrations are difficult to mediate in the re-performance of this brand heritage.

### **Introduction**

It is a special challenge to look at home textile design as part of design culture. On the one hand the textiles are ubiquitous and perform an important role in interior design through their colors, patterns and material qualities to acoustics and bodily senses. That makes textile designers acknowledged experts in interior design. On the other hand textiles often seem to be only background or mere accessories to the 'real' design objects, furniture or table ware. Textiles seem the easiest exchangeable and fragile part of interiors, and interior design is as a whole hard to pinpoint for design historians (Sparke et al. 2009, 147). Despite strong aesthetic and cultural importance the qualities and identities in home textile might be hard to mediate through design culture.

The Danish firm Georg Jensen Damask is a strong brand in Denmark and the neighboring countries with a long history, high quality production and designs by professionally acknowledged weavers and textile designers. They are not related to the Copenhagen silver smith by the same name, but have had a similar reputation, though not on an international market. After many years of family ownership, directed by Bent Georg Jensen, who was trained to this task as textile engineer, the firm changed hands in 1999,

and has been through a fast transformation and adaption to new market and production conditions and new media platforms. Their brand heritage seems to be preserved, though production is outsourced, retail distribution changed drastically, and there is a new organization behind design and marketing. This drastic transformation makes it a very significant case to investigate the historical changes that constitute the current culture of design. The firm has not been 'rebranded', but the brand has been 're-performed' or mediated, as it was in more exclusive circulation before.

In his 2014 afterword of *The Culture of Design*, Guy Julier lists some of the challenges in "Studying Design Culture". I would like to relate two of these, 'mediation' and 'density', to Georg Jensen Damask (Julier 2014, 247-48). Today Georg Jensen Damask experiences rather a kind of return to traditions, but they have to mediate more value of the firm and stories on the designers to the new customers. Tablecloths and towels have to be stronger part of the product and media culture of life style features. They have to be linked to the appropriate brands of kitchen utensils and tableware and feature names of inspiring designers. They have to be part of the package of Danish Design or of the range of Scandinavian design icons for the home. Julier thinks 'density' along with smart phones and the many web based services that enhance each other, but it is equally relevant to see a density among brands and design icons as strong communicators in a mediabased network of meanings. The paper wants to discuss how the firm has tried to re-perform the brand to be part of the picture and show another kind of density in relations and meanings through mediation.

### Designer names

One strong asset from the firm brand heritage is a fine list of professionally acknowledged weavers and textile designers who have contributed as freelance designers. Some of their designs have been produced continually, but there is now a much stronger emphasis on the presentation of them, especially on the homepage with its gallery of designer names and merits. And most significantly they have introduced new kinds of designers to this gallery. One of the first new products after the take-over was made after pattern sketches from the 1950s by Arne Jacobsen, 1902-71, and introduced as part of the 100 years jubilee of the architect in 2002. The patterns were neither made for the firm, for tablecloths nor for the jacquard production technique (damask). But Jacobsen is probably the internationally most known Danish architect/designer, and he now features on the homepage as Georg Jensen Damask's most important designer! Other kinds home interior design from Jacobsen such as chairs from Fritz Hansen, lightning from Louis Poulsen, and steel ware from Stelton are important references, which seem to produce different kind of density in relating the Damask home textiles to other well-known designs.

A follow up to this strategy has been again an old pattern by the late Nanna Ditzel, 1923-2005, who was an internationally recognized furniture architect also known for the design of textiles most famously the Hallingdal upholstery textile, 1965. Her name is closer to textiles, but even she was neither trained weaver nor textile designer as the row of names that worked for Georg Jensen Damask earlier on.

At the homepage the brand heritage is presented like this:

"Our long-standing tradition of working with Denmark's finest architects, designers and artists ensures a wide collection of Damask tablecloths, runners, table mats, bed linen, terry cloth, dish towels and home accessories – naturally rooted in the different designers' individual inspiration and style.  
([www.georgjensen-damask.com/arne-jacobsen-architect-and-designer/](http://www.georgjensen-damask.com/arne-jacobsen-architect-and-designer/), 10/12/13)

Though the firm has only 'worked' with the heirs of Jacobsen and Ditzel, 'architects' are mentioned first, and this is understandable out of the dominating role of architects, especially furniture architects, in Danish Design through the mid-20th century (Fallan 2010, 20). And the weavers and textile designers that have worked closest with the firm are mentioned as 'designers and artists'. This is a strong case of what Penny Sparke calls Designer Culture, where designer names, individualities and professions play a role in historical development and production of meaning in design (Sparke 2012, 5). But we also see a quite dramatic change in relations from one kind of density in the professional links between design and production, an internal design culture of the firm and the profession, to a media based density of references between the home textile products, designer names and narratives of Danish Design, design icons and life style scenes, photos of modern kitchens and rooms. We see the products exposed together with well-known names and objects from ubiquitous life style medias, ads and magazines that is part of the external, more common design culture.



**Figure 1.**  
Artwork, tablecloth  
with pattern  
and prints from  
sketches by Arne  
Jacobsen, Georg  
Jensen Damask

If we look closer at a promotional photo from around 2010 of the special edition of the Arne Jacobsen table cloth, called *Artwork*, we see the pattern in the weaving and an additional digital silver print of hand written notes and sketches by the master. On the top of it are two recent products from Royal Copenhagen, a jar designed by Louise Campbell, and from Kähler, a bowl designed by Søren Thygesen. The tablecloth performs a historical authenticity, but the additions points out how the triangular pattern (originally from the 50s) is in fashion now and similar to the 'faccetta'-pattern of the bowl. And the digital print zooming in on the handwriting equals the *Mega* pattern concept for tableware from Royal Copenhagen, where they have zoomed in and printed details of their traditional Blue painted decoration pattern. Royal Copenhagen is naturally an old alliance partner of Georg Jensen Damask, but Kähler has become even more relevant, because this firm has brought life into an old brand heritage and made a hype of modern faience design in Denmark.

### Product design and branding

These two firms can lead us to the next significant phenomenon of product development and promotion in current design culture. Working with late designers is of course only one part of the new strategy at Georg Jensen Damask. They work with new designer names, even quite young, upcoming ones and more established. Some of these designers have also made products for Royal Copenhagen (Søren Ulrik Petersen), Kähler (Cecilie Manz) and many others. Typically they are trained as furniture or industrial designers and have become known as talented designers across different fields of home product design. Then the customers can collect items of new designer names for their homes, and Georg Jensen Damask is mentioned, when these designers are featured in public medias or life style magazines. Without any background in textile design they seldom have

the intimate knowledge of the jacquard weaving techniques as the early day designers of Georg Jensen Damask, and they seem to have a more graphical and digital approach to patterns and visual effects of the textiles. Liz Moor mentions in *The Rise of Brands* from 2007, how product designers and architects seems to play a central role in the new design practice of branding that has developed since the 1990s both as a special branch and as new common condition of the design market (Moor 2007, 51). The tradition of these professions has developed through artistic experiments with quite different new materials and techniques, and they are trained to see 'everything as media', which is an essential pre-condition in branding (Moor 2007, 46).

In the case of Georg Jensen Damask we see not only that the industrial designers are able to work with home textiles 'as media', but also that these products might add more up to the branding and visual profile of the firm. Their textile patterns might be more 'mediagenic' and fit into the promotional collaboration with photographers and graphic designers for visual distribution on any media platform. This visual focus might lead to a lack of understanding for the materiality of textiles and techniques of weaving. Some of the new designs does not take the full advantage of the two-tone jacquard weaving, and I think especially on the woven Arne Jacobsen pattern that even is less advanced than the four-color cotton print, it was used for at the textile firm Cotil in the 1950s (Thau & Vindum 1998, 476). On the other hand, it is hard to brand a home textile firm as part of the hegemonic narrative of Danish Design and make design icons in this field. (Marimekkos Unikko is the rare exception that is hard to copy.) Home textiles as tablecloths and towels must be both discrete and distinctive to perform in use situations. But Georg Jensen Damask has used the Jacobsen pattern so widely on labels and webpages that it performs like a secondary brand element – perhaps because of simplicity and retro qualities. The primary brand logo is still the weaverbirds' nest (re) drawn by the architect Knud V. Engelhardt in 1928 that is found on or in all products, but it is less flexible to fit in as background in 'any media'. It is made for the old punch cards for weaving machines.

### Brand memories?

The products of Georg Jensen Damask have through the years been sold as perfects gifts: Long tablecloths for wedding presents and runners or towels for other occasions. These items are strongly related to feelings of gratitude and memories of occasions and donators. This is the stuff memories are made of! But this kind of memories relating to family history and personal heritage seems hard to mediate in the present Danish design culture. We rather want to tell what we know about the designers and about design classics, or how the items adds just that little extra experience to our busy, daily life or interior design. The dining room is closed, and we are invited into the kitchen as social work space or life style setting. It is a challenge to design and brand these home textile products to link the right media pictures with the right lanes of memory.

Visual elements might be the strongest tool, but branding is not only a visual sensation. It's a recognition and confirmation of identity and special quality that comes in different media and can touch other senses. "All kinds of materials and spaces become sites in which the brand may be endowed with sensory meanings and associations, and through which consumer perception may be shaped and changed." (Moor 2007:53) The materiality and tactility of home textiles have to be experienced physically be touch and nearby look, and that links to old memories or more unconscious experiences of cloths and towels. That is why the thoroughly composed brand spaces of Georg Jensen Damask are the

final, important part of this re-performance of brand heritage. These products have to be experienced at close hand in a relevant set up. As long as the firm was owned by the Georg Jensen family, female sales consultants visited customers privately to take measure and help to chose the adequate colors for the home. That this old fashioned business form was kept running until 1999 tells us not only of a very traditional firm, but also that many customers had experienced this service as meaningful. Historically branding has always been the attempt of producers to communicate directly to consumers. As sales consultants cannot visit the customers anymore, Georg Jensen Damask invites these to special brand stores.

One big problem in branding, though, is that the strong means of communication seems to act as cover up for realities and don't mirror any everyday experiences of customers. "In other words, many brands do not operate as interfaces; instead, they function like a wall or shield, insulating the production process from its environment." (Lury 2004:159) If the brand scape only materializes the Parnassus of design icons and adored life style scenario, it is still only dream pictures. In his Sideboard Manifesto of design culture Ben Highmore tries to grasp the 'active environment of design' as an orchestration of not only objects, but spaces, situations and negotiations (Highmore 2009, 4). To understand design aesthetically and culturally we have to see it – as part of or in itself assembling – a full 'sensescape', where lots of conditions of materials, situations and memories matters. Here home textiles ought to have a strong hold in making resonance, and the brand space assembles and composes the needed physical density of objects, experiences and meanings. "The study of design culture begins and ends with materiality," Julier reminds us (Julier 2014, 249). Even if the ruling conditions in design culture seems to drag us more into abstract values, visual signs and media scenes, many meanings and experiences are still strongly linked to materiality and physical interaction. The challenge for both designers, firms and scholars is to follow and understand how material and tactile qualities are part of and conditions all the mediations, stories and collective memories that form design culture in the broadest sense.

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