

## **Nipped in the Bud: Clement Meadmore's Interior for the Teahouse**

By Nanette Carter

It is widely known that prior to embarking on a successful international career as a sculptor, that Clement Meadmore was an influential Australian designer of furniture and of the interior of the ground-breaking modernist Legend Espresso and Milk Bar in Melbourne's CBD in 1955. With its black metal and fibreglass furniture, semi-abstract murals by artist Leonard French and its brilliant colour scheme, the Legend was Melbourne's most remarkable café interior at the time when the city was gearing up to host the Olympic Games and doing its best to live up to the image of a progressive and cosmopolitan city. What has been overlooked is that Meadmore designed a second café and milk bar called the Teahouse for Ion Nicolades, the same client who had commissioned the Legend.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Clement Meadmore's 1955 design for the Teahouse was a re-working of the traditional ladies' tearoom. It is examined here not only for its addition to the picture of Australian modernist design in the 1950s but also for what it can tell us about the durable appeal of a notional 'Britishness' within Australia's increasingly modern, cosmopolitan and American influenced consumer culture of the post World War II period. It is argued that allegiance to the British Empire was affirmed within the 'spectacular space' of the Teahouse, an interior designed for women, within which the labour and control of subject people was encoded. From the 19th century commodity of tea and spaces associated with it had been sold throughout Britain and the British Empire using images of imposed order associated with European domination and total control.

Melbourne's successful 1949 bid to host the XVI Olympic Games had led to a building boom, not only of modern sporting facilities like the Borland, McIntyre and Murphy Olympic Swimming Pool (1956), but also a range of commercial buildings and retail spaces in anticipation of the impact of thousands of international and inter-state visitors. Economic expectations and modernisation inspired the renovation of many existing businesses including the Sigales-Nicolades family café and milk bar in Bourke Street that had been established by Ion Nicolades' maternal grandfather as the Anglo American Café and confectionary store around 1918. Transformed by Meadmore's design and with a change of name, it became the Legend.

While both the Legend and the Teahouse served workers and city shoppers at café tables by day, they also attended to patrons of neighbouring cinemas and theatres into the evenings. They provided bar service for confectionary, ice creams, milkshakes and other cold drinks around screening times and at intervals. Inter-war milk bars and cafes located in proximity to cinemas and theatres were a particular kind of social space, their moderne styling providing highly reflective interiors within which patrons would see and be seen by others as an extension of the spectacular experience of film and theatrical performances. Following this custom of spectacular space the Legend and the Teahouse provided a somewhat more stage-like interior than cafes in locations with a more retail or business focus.

The background and practice of the Teahouse designer Clement Meadmore are explored here in order to grasp his intentions and better understand the expression of a nostalgic 'Britishness' in a modernist interior. It is apparent though that the design for the Teahouse necessarily addressed the commercial imperative of providing a café interior that welcomed a specific sector of the public that would have been unlikely to patronise the highly successful Legend only a few doors away. This group was middle class women, for who the Teahouse's updated narrative of British imperial power held greater attraction than the internationalism implied by the Legend's modernist design and the emerging multiculturalism implied by the style of its food and drink choices.

In examining the Teahouse's evocation of the British Empire, this article seeks to uncover something of the relationship of gender, class and allegiance to a notional Britishness that characterised a sector of Australian society in the mid 1950s and how its expression was underpinned by racial ideology. In the white settler colonies of Canada, South Africa, New Zealand and Australia, Britishness was conceived of as "vitaly dependent on Anglo-Saxonism and Caucasian racialism".(2) Allegiance to Britain the seat of Empire, was supported by access to a range of commodities including tea whose advertising and promotion in international exhibitions reinforced the "vertical control over production and of an ordered workforce of 'coolies'...".(3)

## THE LEGEND: CLEMENT MEADMORE DESIGNER

Sculptor Clement Meadmore became prominent in the United States in the late 1960s and '70s, with major museums buying his work and commissions for large scale abstract works in metal, often sited in the forecourts of major corporate headquarters. A local example is his *Awakening* (1968) positioned in front of the AMP building in William Street Melbourne. Art was the second career for Meadmore however; he had emerged as a leading designer of modernist furniture in Australia in the early 1950s.

After completing a first year in aeronautical engineering, Meadmore shifted to the new Industrial Design course at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology from which he graduated in 1949. He established an industrial and interior design practice called Meadmore Originals in 1952 at 86 Collins Street before moving it to 62 Little Collins Street. (4) In 1956 he formed a short-lived partnership to manufacture his furniture designs with Max Robinson (5) and Michael Hirst manufactured some Meadmore furniture designs in addition to his own, from 1959. Meadmore began a fruitful and lasting collaborating with Max Hutchinson in 1956, to manufacture and market his designs. They established Gallery A in Melbourne 1959, an influential exhibition space for new design and local artists working with abstraction, where Meadmore displayed both his design work and early sculptures.

Meadmore's designs were promoted through occasional advertisements and through extensive editorial coverage. His furniture along with that of Grant Featherston, Douglas Snelling and Gerard Doube was ubiquitous in the exciting new modernist homes designed by architects including Robin Boyd, Peter and Dionne McIntyre, and Roy Grounds, that were widely illustrated in *Australian Home Beautiful* and other local journals.

An occasional contributor to the journal *Architecture and Arts* from 1953, Meadmore wrote short articles about furniture, lighting and interior design that indicate a thoughtful approach. While his interiors and exhibition displays recycled a set of his furniture, storage and lighting designs that he was able to build up using different manufacturers, his practice was far from a rigid system. In a 1955 article on interior design he wrote;

*The aim of interior design is much more than merely furnishing a room tastefully. Apart from the basic necessities there is an infinite variety of personal idiosyncrasies which a skilful designer should be capable of incorporating into a unified whole... The same principles apply to all types of interiors — business, professional, exhibition or commercial.* (6)

Meadmore's reputation as a furniture designer was clearly established with his daring black steel dining chair and bar stools with brightly coloured synthetic fibre cord forming their backs and seats that appeared widely in advertising and fashionable interiors throughout Australia from 1952. He received a national Good Design Award for the chairs from the Good Design Society in Sydney that year. His chairs, tables, shelving units and lighting were sold by department stores the Myer Emporium and Georges, modern furniture specialists Anderson and Michael Hirst, and interior design consultancies such as Stuart's of South Yarra and Marion-Hall Best in Sydney.

In addition to furniture and lighting designs, Meadmore undertook a small number of interior design commissions, most famously for The Legend Espresso and Milk Bar at 239 Bourke Street. Commissioned by Ion Nicolades, a friend of Meadmore's from Melbourne's modern jazz scene, the Legend departed from the milk bar and café vernacular inspired by American drugstores, that had

proliferated throughout Australian cities and country towns in the 1930s and continued into the post war period. Rather than the streamlined stainless steel counters, ice-cream palette and prevalence of glossy laminates and glass, Meadmore used Scandinavian/northern European-inspired vertical wood panelling for the bar and long fluorescent lights suspended with a playful asymmetry throughout the adjoining long narrow spaces. Tiny mosaic tiles were used on the exterior and a terrazzo floor was made of large irregular stone pieces contrasting with the fine terrazzo and large exterior faience tiles used on inter-war milk bars and cafes.



*The Legend Espresso Bar, Melbourne c.1957, reproduced courtesy of Ion Nicolades*

With its sharp right angles and strong abstract forms, details like its contemporary punctured aluminium down lights over the café tables at the rear and welded black steel chairs that Meadmore designed specifically for the cafe, The Legend gained considerable attention for its design. Michael Bogle has described it as an "...innovative and playful interior developed within the language of international modernism" explaining that "Meadmore's aesthetic during this period permitted a surprising use of colour and pattern, far exceeding any of his later works."<sup>(7)</sup> The primary colours red, blue and yellow at full intensity were chosen for the fibreglass stool seats and the laminate counters of both café and milk bar. The Legend's furniture appears to have been influenced by American style, the furniture is suggestive of the chairs of Harry Bertoina, Don Knorr and Eero Saarinen for Knoll.

A much admired feature of the design was its inclusion of contemporary abstract art, a suite of seven paintings Meadmore commissioned from emerging artist Leonard French on the theme of Sinbad the Sailor, hung behind the Espresso bar. French used rich jewel-like colours with red and yellow as the dominant hues and bold symbolic shapes. The wall of the milk bar was hung with mirrors that reflected the paintings opposite, the wall dividing the two areas was punctuated with openings to allow the images to jump across the space, recalling the way that images leap from film to screen in the nearby cinemas. The front window of the Espresso bar displayed a welded metal sculpture by Meadmore, inspired by French's abstracted representation of Sinbad's ship that provided a visual connection to the lines of its steel chair backs at the rear of the cafe.

The Legend has been described as introducing a new kind of café and milieu that introduced Anglo Australians to the sophisticated café culture of Europe and contributed to the acceptance of the values of multiculturalism. While often far too much is made of the acceptance of the food and dining culture of Australia's non-British migrants as a sign of their social acceptance, of social harmony and the success of multiculturalism, certainly The Legend offered a striking modernist interior in which to enjoy Italian coffee, pasta and risotto dishes, Greek cakes as well as a range of more traditional Anglo-Australian café fare in a prominent downtown location. (8)

## **THE TEAHOUSE**

Neglected so far in accounts of Meadmore's design work, the Teahouse was a smaller café and milk bar Meadmore also designed for Ion Nicolades in response to the success of *The Legend*. It was in the same block and on the same side of Bourke Street, near the corner of Swanston Street, the axis of the commercial epicentre of Melbourne's CBD. Like the *Legend*, it catered to passing trade and the cinema crowds, but while the chic modern bars of Italy inspired the *Legend*, either directly or via London's rapidly proliferating youth-oriented coffee bars, the Teahouse referred to their maiden great aunt, the quaint British tearoom.

While also a dramatically modernist interior in the context of mid 1950s Melbourne, the Teahouse referred to the well-established tearoom typology, minus the clutter. It was aimed at middle class women and was thus a space that was gendered female. Not surprisingly its menu reflects its appeal to Anglo-Australian certainties with tea (China blend or Ceylon), along with various iced drinks, sandwiches, salads and grills. Coffee was not offered and neither was pasta nor baklava.



*The Teahouse, Melbourne, c.1956, reproduced courtesy of Ion Nicolades*

The bringing together of women and narratives of the British Empire has been regarded as somewhat problematic since traditionally women weren't understood as being active contributors to its formation and development. Upper and middle class men were understood as having made and maintained the British Empire without them; women's role in empire was represented as largely symbolic or peripheral. Yet within Britain and throughout the British Empire and later the British Commonwealth, women gave tacit political support and drove the imperial project through their enthusiastic consumption of imperial goods and services, spectacles and images of empire. Being seen as supporting the Empire through their consumption fitted with the traditional construction of women as consumers rather than producers.

Contrasting with the grids and right angles prevalent in *The Legend* scheme, Meadmore made judicious use of the arabesque and the curved line and of plants, both as motif and as objects in the Teahouse. Since the nineteenth century, organic lines and shapes were used to signify the feminine through an ostensible connection to the female body and to its natural capacity to support new life. A mural on the right hand side of the café, painted by Meadmore himself spelled the letter 'T' assembled from a range of Victorian Baroque architectural ornament festooned with plant tendrils.<sup>(9)</sup> One front window was filled with hanging baskets while the other included a pot of ribbon grass, a squat Victorian silver teapot and the 4 page menu on a slender metal stand on a bed of small white stones. The name of the café was painted on the front windows in two contrasting nineteenth century typefaces.



*The Teahouse, Melbourne, c. 1956, reproduced courtesy of Ion Nicolades*

The recoding of Victorian vernacular design Meadmore used here was also characteristic of an emerging strand of modernist design in England in the 1950s that he may have encountered during his trip to England and Europe in 1953 and through imported architecture and design journals. Mary Quant and Alexander Plunkett-Green were drawing attention to their Chelsea boutique Bazaar with surrealist assemblages of Victorian tat picked up from local second-hand dealers. In the cutting edge *Typographica* magazine (1949-1967) Herbert Spencer published photo-essays on Victorian vernacular signs and combined decorative wooden type with modern sans serif typefaces on covers and in layouts. Meadmore's play with traditional typefaces, hanging baskets of trailing plants and strategically positioned silver teapot were similarly ironic and expressed a confidence in controlling the mixed messages of redundant Victorian vernacular and modernist iconoclasm.

Echoing the asymmetrical arrangement of lighting in the Legend, Meadmore hung around thirty conical lightshades in a close and irregular arrangement in the front half of the Teahouse. While fitting with the modernist enthusiasm for basic geometric shapes, primary colours and forms, in this context, the conical shape is also an allusion to the straw hats of tea plantation workers. While it is a striking visual effect, the allusion to colonial labour – undifferentiated, endless and mute, encoded an inevitability and triumphalism characteristic of nineteenth century commodity kitsch of the kind seen in traditional tearooms and in advertisements for soap and tea. As theorist Anne McClintock argues, in these kinds of representations, white women and racial types “are figured not as historic agents but as frames for the commodity, valued for exhibition alone”. This is despite the fact that it was the poorly paid and often indentured labourers and forced colonial trade ‘agreements’ that made tea and other formerly exotic commodities affordable and ubiquitous in Britain and throughout the Empire and Commonwealth. (10) Similarly middle class womens’ traditional labour of keeping house and raising children is understood today as productive in economic terms.

In discussing the politics of race evident in tea advertising Arnandi Ramamurthy explains that while “in the majority of advertising, the social relations of production and depictions of labours are usually deliberately hidden”, in the case of tea advertising from the 19th century it was “exalted”. (11) Tea was promoted using images of imposed order over the bushes of the ‘tea-garden’ landscape, lines of plodding elephants and through innumerable regularly spaced workers. Ramamurthy points out how despite the demise of the British Empire, the representation of regimented coolies persisted in British tea packaging and advertising into the late 1980s. (12)

While Meadmore explored overtly illusionistic spatial effects with the Legend, there are no such effects in the Teahouse. Its side-walls were covered with emphatically flat vertical panels of a single colour, curved at the top to suggest the swag of a curtain. This curve echoes the concave detailing on the back of the café chairs but more importantly it represents the drape of textile walls, constituting a motif with a long history, the campaign tent. Since the Christian crusades it has appeared in Western manuscripts, in painting, textiles and decoration, alluding to military adventures and conquests. It was

prominently revived in the early nineteenth century in France as part of Empire style, notably in the *porte cochère* and interiors of the Empress Josephine's house Malmaison, apparently to help the habitual conqueror Napoleon feel at home when not abroad in the battlefield. In the Teahouse the campaign tent motif alludes to the British Empire, the 'romance' of life under canvas experienced by the military and the adventuring of early capitalists in Asia. The rear wall was covered with a curtain, a continuous length of actual textile, creating an intimate, contained space that gestured to the traditionally feminine domain of the tearoom with its abundant use of textiles, albeit in a spare modernist manner.

The colour palette of the Teahouse presents another contrast with the Meadmore's design for the interior of the Legend. While primary colours at full intensity had been used there, more sedate, lady-like autumnal colours of green, yellow and orange with accents of white and grey were chosen for the Teahouse. (13)

As with the Legend Meadmore custom-designed chairs for the Teahouse using black steel frames but this time using bent ply for the seat and back. The design was possibly inspired by Danish designer Arne Jacobsen's Ant chair (1952) that went on to become a much-emulated international design classic. Other possible influences on the frame include Harry Bertoia's Diamond chair (1952), Donald Knorr's Metal Chair (1950), and other Knoll and Herman Miller designs using steel. A likely local influence is Grant Featherston's cane and steel chair (1954) in which the seat appears to be raised above its horizontal thin steel support. In terms of Meadmore's development as a designer and experimentation with materials, the Teahouse chair is half way between the Legend's black steel chair with simple vertical bars as a back support and his 1959 plastic coated steel grid chair manufactured by Michael Hirst with its strikingly sculptural back.

The Teahouse chair wasn't Meadmore's first use of bent ply, he had used it in an extraordinary Surrealist-inspired and experimental three-legged stacking chair design in 1954-5. The top of the orange-coloured chair back is scooped out, echoing the curve of the wall panels and suggesting a tealeaf out of which the tip has been plucked. In the view from the street, the café's assembled chairs imply a tea garden bed over which the ghostly coolie hat lampshades float.

## TEA AND TRIUMPHALISM

When Melbourne succeeded in its bid for the Olympic Games in 1949 Australia's economy was relatively limited, some would say stifled, by tight government control of banking and finance. The move from a war economy to consumer society was held back by the strong fears of the Labor government (maintained by the succeeding Liberal government) that the conditions that had produced the 1930s depression might return if control of interest rates and tariffs were lifted. Increasing sales of agricultural exports and primary materials in the early 1950s, notably wool to supply American and allied soldiers engaged in the escalating Korean War, provided an injection of capital. This created much-needed liquidity and supported the development of domestic consumption and business investment.

While increasing immigration from Europe contributed much needed labour and stimulated demand throughout the 1950s, Australian manufacturers and retailers struggled to obtain materials and supply goods and the government and building industry scrambled to address housing needs. Shortages of housing and basic goods contributed to social friction. The development of a consumer culture to support Melbourne's realisation of a progressive, open and cosmopolitan city and society was a work in progress rather than a *fait accompli* in 1955. Multiculturalism was a future reality, assimilation was the dominant ideology in relation to both immigrants and indigenous Australians at this time.

Even as Australians returned in the post-war period to the internationalism and fascination with the power of American capitalism and its vigorous consumer culture that had begun in the 1930s loyalty to Britain, to the monarchy and the British Commonwealth were central to Australian official culture and middle class values in the mid 1950s. It was HRH the Duke of Edinburgh who would open the

1956 Olympic Games, the royal presence sanctioning Melbourne's reaching out to embrace the world beyond the Commonwealth.

It has been argued that the culture and values at all levels of British society from the ruling class to factory workers during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were fundamentally shaped by Britain's imperial project, that "...militarism, heroism, masculinity and monarchy formed a cluster of the core beliefs of imperial patriotism." (14) Further, that Australia's white settler colonial society was characterised by a 'powerful ideology of whiteness', "an aspect of Britishness that the colonial setting generated". (15) Recent research has emphasized the durability of Britishness in the settler-colonial world, well into the post-war period.

Clement Meadmore's Teahouse used the language of international modernism along with conical floating coolie hat light shades, campaign tent panels and Victorian vernaculars to present a racially inscribed narrative, constructing middle class Australian society as part of the British empire, attached by the "...crimson thread of kinship of white imperial ties". (16) Ideologies of race formed "...one common if non-identical link between the far-flung colonies of the British empire." (17) The language, sentiments and civic culture of the British world were extremely resilient in the face of unprecedented strains on the material and cultural ties of the British Empire and Commonwealth in the post World War II period. (18)

## CONCLUSION

The Teahouse provided space in Melbourne within which Britishness was performed by middle class women from 1955 until around 1958, when the building it occupied was sold and the lease terminated. Like Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace, which heralded the introduction of a total glass inspection house whose innovation lay "...its ability to merge the pleasure principle with the discipline of the spectacle", the Teahouse was a spectacular space. (19) Deriving its role from its position close to cinemas and theatres and Melbourne's retail centre, the Teahouse was commissioned to address a section of the middle class market, primarily women, whose values and tastes were not addressed by the Legend's sophisticated language of style with its striking references to Scandinavian and American modernism, and to Mediterranean culture in its art and food. The use of Victorian vernaculars in the signage, objects and motifs of the Teahouse and its basis in the feminine tearoom typology, communicated the certainties of tradition, even as its interior simultaneously incorporated new materials, abstraction and a functionalist minimalism.

While modernist in style, the conical lightshades, wall panels and chairs of the Teahouse encoded triumphal messages about the British Empire and its control of subject non-white people and their labour. Despite the reality of the dismantling of the Empire, the transformation of the uncontrolled exotic into the everyday domestic commodity was reinforced through the commodity spectacle in this space. In her analysis of colonial commodity kitsch of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries McClintock explains how it refigures "...military subjugation, cultural coercion and economic thuggery...as benign domestic processes. (20) Ironically Clement Meadmore's design, which encouraged the performance of Britishness by Melbourne's middle class matrons and young women, celebrated the colonial project, updating and reinforcing it using of the language of modernism with its internationalist inflections.

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