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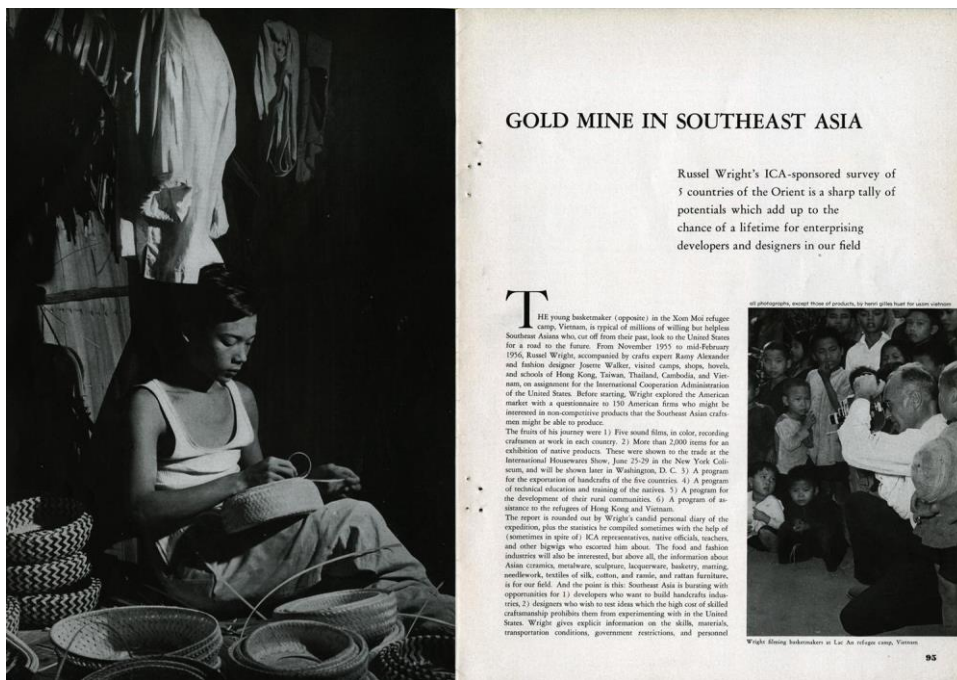
AMERICAN DESIGN DIPLOMACY IN SOUTH VIETNAM: GENDER AS A DIPLOMATIC RELATION, 1956

Introduction

A young artisan sits alone on the ground making a basket at the Xom Moi Refugee Camp north of Saigon. During January, 1956, American industrial designer Russel Wright saw his photograph and others depicting refugee artisans installed at the Saigon Chamber of Commerce.¹ Eight months later, the basket maker's photograph featured as the first page of an article published in *Interiors* magazine. On the facing page, Wright appears in a small photograph that shows him filming in the Lac An Basket Makers Village. However, from the direction Wright is facing, magazine readers might think he was looking through his camera across the pages to the unidentified basket maker

¹ Russel Wright Papers. Box 45. Special Collections. Syracuse University.

and filming him (**Fig. 1**). What accounts for this visual elision appearing at the beginning of an article about Wright overseeing an American State Department craft program in Southeast Asia? What does it portend about Wright's relationship to his ostensible subject, the refugee basket maker? And, on what was their relationship based?



[Fig.1.] Photographs by Henri Gilles Huet, as published in Wright, Russel (1956). Gold Mine in Southeast Asia. *Interiors*. 94-95.

During 1954, Vietnam won its political independence from France, yet it would remain involved in civil war. Before the border closed that would divide the nation into North Vietnam and South Vietnam, the United States, Great Britain, and France stepped in to aid some of the nearly one million northerners who were migrating south. The American State Department contracted Wright to survey craft production in South Vietnam as part of a larger constellation of American efforts aimed at resettling these refugees and shepherding their new nation into the Free World of democratic, mostly capitalist

nations serving as a bulwark against the spread of communism. Wright would report on his findings and subsequently develop and implement an export program that accommodated Vietnamese craft to American middle class tastes in home furnishings and fashion accessories. In addressing this remit, Wright would have to persuade American importers, distributors, merchandisers, and consumers that Vietnamese craft was desirable and available.

Photographic images of Vietnamese artisans published in English-language mass print media—magazines such as *Interiors*, *Craft Horizons*, and *Industrial Design*, along with nationally circulating newspapers—served as part of a graphic network extending images of these aid efforts to Americans at home in the continental United States. In the context of their accompanying articles, these images resonated Wright’s remit by engaging the home furnishings industry and middle class in desiring and using craft they didn’t make, hailing from a new, faraway nation they didn’t know.

In what follows, I begin to explore how gender nuanced this activity by expressing a relationship of unequal power between the American designer and the Vietnamese artisan. Americans participating in the State Department’s efforts in South Vietnam promoted the benefits of craft assistance to artisans there, based on politics. Politics is the exercise and distribution of power involving influence and authority. Adrian Leftwich finds politics “wherever questions of power control decision-making and resource allocation between two or more people occur in any human society, past or present,”² while museum studies

² Leftwich, Andrew (2004). *What is Politics? The Activity and Its Study*. Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 14.

scholar Sharon McDonald refers to “the workings of power.”³ There is also what Andrew Heywood calls the “power of agenda setting”⁴ and what follows from that activity.

The politics of the American diplomacy of South Vietnam meted craft through American power, and published photographs served its interests. For instance, the photograph of the basket maker and others featuring artisans at work corroborated State Department ideas about the importance of resettling refugees in South Vietnam because they appeared in articles stressing the importance of Americans working with refugees for purposes of their resettlement. Also, the visual reference to Wright filming, as if in proximity to the basket maker and even recording his image, represents Wright in a position of power as a designer diplomat to whom refugee artisans were subject. Furthermore, in filling up the entire first page of the *Interiors* article, the photograph of the basket maker served as a visual and conceptual gateway into the article outlining the authority and agency of Wright and his team in Southeast Asia. Smaller photographs appearing throughout the article conveyed the supporting theme of the diversity of artisan productivity and skills, while others reinforced Wright’s and his team’s superiority in evaluating craft production.

Ideas about American international and national needs in the context of the Cold War led the State Department to extend its influence abroad in expanding the Free World—a designation implying that the world was unfree, save for those nations, mostly democratic and capitalist, that affiliated with the United States as opposed to the Communist bloc. This

³Macdonald, Sharon (1998). *The Politics of Display: Museums, Science, Culture*. Routledge: London and New York, 3.

⁴Leftwich, *What is Politics? The Activity and Its Study*. [op. cit.], 9.

influence, combined with the orientation of its agency, resources, and authority, gave the American diplomacy of South Vietnam, including the craft aid program, an imperialist tone. To be sure, Wright spoke about avoiding taking over or wiping out a native culture, and he cautioned that Vietnam should not mechanize or mass produce craft or westernize it too much. In other words, the United States should not culturally colonize Vietnam. Still, Americans were advancing a horizon of possibility and expectations concerning Vietnamese craft. In reviewing how Marx outlined stages of capitalism—from a handicraft stage, to a capitalist “concentration of artisan and handicraft production under the control of a single capitalist” and modern industry with “the coming of machine tools and the factory system,” social historian Raphael Samuel cautioned that these stages intermixed in combined and uneven development.⁵ When it came to South Vietnam, Americans supported uneven development across various industries, with some rapidly mechanizing, whereas craft should remain a hand-based labor, albeit more concentrated in manufacture located in cooperatives and ultimately organized under the auspices of the government of South Vietnam, yet avoiding mechanization and a factory system.

Americans aimed to capitalize on what they identified in Vietnamese craft that would appeal domestically in the United States and thereby contribute to the larger goal of vitalizing the Vietnamese economy to prevent discontent and Vietnam turning to communist nations for support. Ironically, they used modern American approaches to design, manufacturing, and industry to shelter Vietnamese craft from western

⁵ Samuel, Raphael (1977). *The Workshop of the world: steam power and hand technology in mid-Victorian Britain*, *History Workshop Journal* 3 (Spring). Excerpted, chapter 12, 83-91, in: Adamson, Glenn (ed.) (2010). *The Craft Reader*, Oxford: Berg Publishers, 87.

modernization. For example, craft manufacture there, according to Americans, required greater organization, productivity, and professionalism, and craft needed the application of American modernist design elements as a means to adapt it for Americans at home. To this point, Russel Wright Associates (RWA) implemented American ways of anticipating and measuring craft production concerning South Vietnam, such as surveys of manufacturing and inventory as well as market studies, work plans, hiring, budgeting, and resource allocation, and RWA introduced modernism through new types of artifacts along with American style preferences concerning shapes, materials, and colors.

Archival materials lack American dialogue with South Vietnamese officials and references to South Vietnamese leadership or collaboration in these endeavors. Instead, publications such as the American-oriented magazine called *Free World*, published in the Philippines, along with reports and correspondence authored by Americans, speak to the intended or expressed agency, influence, and aspirations of an American politics of the diplomacy of South Vietnam resonating in the craft aid project. So do photographs included in some of these publications express the power of the designer, and in some respects, they resonate themes common in colonial-era photography.

To this last point, Wright's seeming to look at and film the basket maker, and the opportunity *Interiors* gave its readers to see Wright looking, and to linger over the shiny, velvety expanse of the page holding forth the body and activity of his non-western subject, iterate Deborah Poole's claim that

the field of vision is organized in some systemic way. It also clearly suggests that this organization has as much to do with

social relationships, inequality, and power as with shared meanings and community. In the more specific sense of a political economy, it also suggests this organization bears some-not necessarily direct- relationship to the political and class structure of society as well as to the production and exchange of the material goods or commodities that form the life blood of modernity...⁶

including its flows of images and goods through international channels. These social and economic dimensions of American modernity drove craft aid efforts to treat South Vietnam as part of a feedback loop bringing together American political interests, American domestic economic interests, their expression in craft production in South Vietnam, and their export from there to the United States. Jodi Kim analyzes how canonical documents of the Cold War portray “American exceptionalism in which imperialist desires are at once revealed and veiled by casting America as uniquely qualified to champion the cause of freedom and democracy throughout the world,”⁷ including in Asia.⁸ Poole and Kim help us notice that photographic references to gender as well as race and age index these impulses to power organized through the American economic diplomacy of Vietnam.

The industrial designer and masculinity

⁶ Poole, Deborah (1997). *Vision, Race, and Modernity: A Visual Economy of the Andean Image World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 8.

⁷ Kim, Jodi (2010). *Ends of Empire, Asian American Critique and the Cold War*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 38-9.

⁸ Kim, *Ends of Empire, Asian American Critique and the Cold War*, 59.

It is important to review some of the history of design that speaks to the significance of gender and the designer. It resonates what diplomatic historian Robert Dean calls the “cultural ideals of manhood” expressed in popular, albeit profession-based culture.⁹

Dean notes that the “ideology of masculinity” consists of a “cultural system of prescription and proscription that organizes the ‘performance’ of an individual’s role in society” and “draws boundaries around the social category of manhood” to “legitimate power and privilege.”¹⁰ The “proscriptive aspect” sustaining industrial design delimited mid twentieth-century boundaries of manhood that legitimated the designer’s authority. These “rule[d] out certain ways of imagining and acting in the world”¹¹ while fostering others in a patriarchal context.

For example, design historian Peter McNeil has shown a gender shift in the design of home furnishings extending from Victorian-era “design reformers, notably John Ruskin and Charles Eastlake” who criticized “tradesman who co-ordinated the outfitting of middle- and upper-class homes” during the late nineteenth century,¹² to the recognition of women professionals after 1900.¹³ During the inter-war period, McNeil says more women working and “the close connection between decorating and the home” shifted the field further to include women, while “the gendered charge of ‘home’ sanctioned interior decoration as

⁹ Dean, Robert (2001). *Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the Making of Cold War Foreign Policy*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹² McNeil, Peter (1994). Designing Women: Gender, Sexuality and the Interior Decorator, c. 1890-1940. *Art History*, 17 no. 4, 632.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 635.

a career for women.”¹⁴ Nevertheless, by the 1920s, professional design opportunities for women were diminishing. Moreover, the work of Frank Alvah Parsons helped to masculinize interior decoration as a taught profession,¹⁵ while notions of the home as a gendered space, and “decorating one’s self and one’s domestic setting,”¹⁶ defined the modern consumer as female.¹⁷ Additionally, McNeil says, “the model of sensual, intuitive, colour-hungry femininity became the other to the rational male concerned with the pursuit of universal truth.”¹⁸

This gendered world of professionals facilitated pathways by which Asian artifacts and reproductions entered American lives and homes. Between the 1870s and 1920s, upper middle class and middle class American women welcomed Asian objects into public venues and their homes as decoration.¹⁹ Often eluding historical specificity, these objects expressed the Aesthetic Movement’s amalgamations of time and place. Mari Yoshihara notes the “critical role” that “male practitioners of Orientalism” played “in bringing white women and ‘Asia’ together in a ‘proper’ form that was compatible with the dominant racial and gender ideology”²⁰ aligning white men with authority over women and people considered nonwestern.

During the 1950s, home furnishings magazines promoted yet another Asian turn in the decoration of middle class and upper middle class American homes. They referenced Asia broadly and vaguely by

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 637.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 639.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 640.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 649.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 652.

¹⁹ Yoshihara, Mari (2003). *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 17-18.

²⁰ Yoshihara, *Embracing the East*, 43.

combining cultural references from many times and places without pinning down a specific region or nation, as occurs in the article, “The Oriental Mood in *Interiors*” by William Parker McFadden—“It is the best of the East and the West, old and new.”²¹ During this era, design’s purview encompassed the grand to the banal, with the field mostly recognizing men, as was occurring in other professions. According to designer George Nelson, designers should “develop an artist’s awareness of the modern world, and by this I mean a total awareness which integrates the outlook of the scientist, the mathematician and everyone else who is active creatively.”²² It wasn’t that women designers, including industrial designers, didn’t exist. Rather, the design profession didn’t concede their ability to practice as a scientist-mathematician-creative. Moreover, women received less attention “in a field overwhelmingly dominated by men” and, consequently, as Ella Howard and Eric Setliff observe, “women are mentioned only infrequently in histories of twentieth-century industrial design.”²³

Thus, a major “proscriptive aspect” of industrial design drew upon a male female binary, with the male industrial designer having “power and privilege”²⁴ to oversee the design and styling of all items and prevail as their key authority. The masculinized status of the industrial designer who guided women’s taste resonated in Wright’s career. In proposing a line of fine china to the Takashimaya Company, RWA

²¹ Gueft, Olga (1955). The Oriental Mood in *Interiors* by William Parker McFadden. *Interiors*. n°115, 118-119.

²² Nelson, George. (1957). *Problems of design*. New York: Whitney Publications Incorporated, 7.

²³ Howard, Ella H. & Setliff, Eric (2000). ‘In a Man’s World’: Women Industrial Designer. In: Kirkham, Pat, (ed.), *Women Designers in the USA, 1900-2000: Diversity and Difference*. New York: Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts; New Haven: Yale University Press, 269.

²⁴ Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood*. [op. cit.], 5.

claimed that Wright's authority in home furnishings was unrivaled, and Wright was the most renowned designer among American housewives.²⁵ Moreover, it asserted, from the late 1930s to the late 1950s, Wright's dinnerware was extraordinarily successful among the modern-oriented American middle class as it turned a significant profit.²⁶ *Interiors* recognized Wright's eminence by collapsing his firm's activity into Wright's identity, announcing, as the subtitle of the article about RWA's work in Southeast Asia: "Russel Wright's U.S. Government-sponsored report on East Asia."²⁷

What also imputed power to Wright were connotations of the "industrial" in his designation as an "industrial designer." Edgar Kaufmann, curator of the Department of Industrial Design at the Museum of Modern Arts, associated industrial design with

the objects and machines used in an industrialized community. Hydroelectric turbines, sunglasses, airplanes, paring knives, gasoline pumps, rope, reapers, cigarette lighters and chairs are examples. Some are made by machine, some by hand; some are part of everyday life, some are special equipment. All are shaped by man for use today in his life as it has developed since the industrial revolution.²⁸

Typically, the scope of the industrial designer's work aligned him with industry. Moreover, shaping "objects and machines" for the

²⁵ Russel Wright Associates (1959). Proposal to Takashimaya, Inc., for The Design of a Line of Fine China. Russel Wright Papers, Box 46, Special Collections, Syracuse University.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Wright, Russel (1956). Gold Mine in Southeast Asia. *Interiors*. 116 no. 1: 95.

²⁸ Kaufman, Edgar. (1946). The Department of Industrial Design. *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art*. 14 No. 1: 3.

“industrialized community” of the United States embedded Wright as a “man” in a chain linking their production, distribution, and consumption. Interestingly, RWA, Wright, and the State Department referred to craft as a particular type of industry--a cottage industry or a small industry associated with the home and domesticity as opposed to an “industrialized community.” By framing craft as an industry having strong associations with the home, in a patriarchal society the designer held “power and privilege”²⁹ over it and, presumably over makers of craft therein, too.

As noted in RWA’s initial contract with the State Department’s Foreign Operations Administration, the craft aid project in South Vietnam would provide

technical assistance for small manual industries to determine effective methods for demonstration and training in developing and improving products which are now being made manually, introduce better tools and materials, and establishing more effective marketing methods.³⁰

The contract’s language recognizes the industrial designer as someone who approaches craft from professional business and economic perspectives. It avoids referencing craft as a vocational, personal, or feminine, nor does it characterize RWA’s work as domestic. Delimiting these boundaries was necessary since, as Joseph McBrinn shows for one strand of craft, in mid-twentieth century America, “for men, needlecrafts, with their societal associations of emasculation,

²⁹ Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood*. [op. cit.], 5.

³⁰ Agreement between United States of America Foreign Operations Administration and Russel Wright doing business as Russel Wright Associations June 30, 1955, Record Group 469, P 186, Box 31. National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

feminization and homosexuality, were generally out of bounds as the ultimate site of disempowerment.”³¹

Some of Wright’s colleagues helped to reinforce the types of masculinized power and privilege that were being associated with industrial design and designers. For example, in writing about design and craft in the context of small industry, Don Wallance associated Wright with a particularly high level of professional expertise. According to Wallance, Wright exemplified someone “generally highly creative and energetic, simultaneously active in design, business management, and the technical aspects of the firm’s activities,” and his “technical resourcefulness, imagination, and a ‘better mousetrap’ philosophy are often the most valuable assets of the firm.”³² In regard to design, “the motivation for this work is problem-solving (usually with sales motives), rather than emotional drive.”³³ These attributes, and Wallance distinguishing problem-solving from emotional drive, further associated Wright and industrial design with “high-status positions” in “modern industrial societies”³⁴ and aligned industrial design and its designers with masculinity as opposed to femininity.

Some of the readers of magazines and newspapers reporting on Wright’s initial trip to South Vietnam reflected these “cultural ideals of manhood” framing and informing industrial design.³⁵ For example, the

³¹ McBrinn, Joseph (2015). Needlepoint for Men: Craft and Masculinity in Postwar America. *The Journal of Modern Craft*. 8 no. 3, 305.

³² Wallance, Don (1956). Design and Craftsmanship in Small Scale Industry, Part Two. *Industrial Design*. 3, 83.

³³ Doblin, Jay (1957). The Position of Crafts in America Today, 45–51 in: *Asilomar*: first annual conference of American craftsmen: sponsored by the American Craftsmen’s Council, 47.

³⁴ Glick, Peter and Fiske, Susan T. Gender, Power Dynamics, and Social Interaction. [*op. cit.*], 373.

³⁵ Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood*. [*op. cit.*] 6.

readership for *Interiors* consisted of professionals, namely, “The Interiors Group,” which the magazine enumerated as interior designers, architects who do interior work, industrial designers who specialize in interior furnishings, the interior decorating departments of retail stores, and...all concerned with the creation and production of interiors—both residential and commercial.”³⁶ The magazine also claimed that the article about Wright aimed at “the food and fashion industries [that] will also be interested, but above all, the information about Asian ceramics, metalware, sculpture, lacquerware, basketry, matting, needlework, textiles of silk, cotton, and ramie, and rattan furniture, is for our field.”³⁷ Although the article had consumers in mind, more directly, it addressed readers who were Wright’s peers by offering “the chance of a lifetime for enterprising developers and designers in our field.”³⁸ Coded for men, the “chance of a lifetime” signified masculinity in design as a potentially ambitious endeavor awaiting the most resourceful of male designers. These attributes of the field—“our field”—encoded designers’ masculinity as a “certain way of imagining and acting in the world”³⁹ that intersected their selves and activity with design and craft and the American home from a position of agency and authority.

³⁶ Table of contents page, *Interiors* 116 no. 1, 5.

³⁷ Wright, Gold Mine in Southeast Asia. [*op. cit.*], 95.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 95.

³⁹ Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood*. [*op. cit.*], 5.

Diplomacy “is no soft-hearted charity. It is, as it ought to be, a hard-headed business”⁴⁰

These attributes also resonated the masculinity of mid twentieth-century diplomacy. As Cheryl Buckley observed, “the codes of design, as used by the designer, are produced within patriarchy to express the needs of the dominant group.”⁴¹ For *Interiors*, this group consisted of other male professionals. The “prescriptive aspect” of the industrial designer drew from this group and broadly, too, from patriarchal masculinity, to “construct a narrative identity”⁴² for Wright as a designer diplomat.

Writing in *Industrial Design* magazine, Avrom Fleishman characterized the American industrial designer as an economic diplomat and designer diplomat.⁴³ His identity as a professional, according to Wallace, leaning more towards problem-solving than “emotional drive,” and avoiding emotive language or references to craft as pleasure, enjoyment, or feminized taste and perspectives, anticipated what historian Fabian Hilfrich describes as the gendering of 1960s American foreign policy favoring intervention in Southeast Asia. It promoted manliness as realism, “a supposedly hard-nosed and dispassionately analytical theory. Man was recast as a rational and unsentimental thinker who concentrated on the ‘facts,’ rather than on utopian

⁴⁰ Handicrafts from Vietnam (1958). *New York Times*. September 29, 26.

⁴¹ Buckley, Cheryl (1987). Made in patriarchy: towards a feminist analysis of women and design. *Design Issues*. 3 no. 2: 10.

⁴² Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood*. [op. cit.], 5.

⁴³ Fleishman, Aaron (1956). The Designer as Economic Diplomat: The Government Applies the Designer’s Approach to Problems of International Trade. *Industrial Design*. 3, 68.

wishes.”⁴⁴ In *Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the Making of Cold War Foreign Policy*, Dean also revealed foreign policy as a gendered construction, and his work has direct implications for mid-century industrial designers aiding the State Department, too. On the other hand, that identity was there already, issuing from the world of design and industrial design.

The *Interiors* article about RWA in Southeast Asia offered no information about personal interactions between Wright, his colleagues, and the people he met as he traveled. Instead, the patriarchal power of the male industrial designer underwrote his authority, and the mass print media supplied examples. In *Industrial Design*, Fleishmann confirmed that the State Department’s craft program selected men who were nationally renowned as industrial designers and managed their own significant businesses at home.

The independent agency set up in Washington to handle this aspect of the foreign aid program is the International Cooperation Administration and it is through ICA that design enters the picture. ICA directs a large share of America’s technical assistance program to semi- or non-industrial nations. The men the ICA selects are various: generally they involve working with small industries and craftsmen to raise the quality of their production, direct them toward the ready markets for their work at home and abroad, and advise them on production, credit and marketing. The broad objective is to raise the standard of living of the man-on-the-street in Pakistan or

⁴⁴ Hilfrich, Fabian (2004). Manliness and ‘realism’: the use of gendered tropes in the debates on the Philippine-American and on the Vietnam War. In: Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht, Frank Schumacher (eds.), *Culture and International History*. (60-78). New York: Berghahn Books, 62.

Jamaica, to give him a better chance of living a productive life free of the allure of communist ideology.⁴⁵

The pre-eminence of these professionals would help insure that as designer diplomats, they bettered the life of “the man-on-the-street” in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. To this point, the ICA recognized that securing the services of these men was a priority. Milton J. Esman, Chief of the Program and Requirements Division for the United States Operations Mission [USOM] in Vietnam, told the ICA that contracting with them was “vital to the administration of the Vietnam Country Program because it was too difficult to recruit personnel to hire and that have the required special skills, and USOM would coach and supervise them.⁴⁶ Wright and his firm would support USOM in Vietnam “in product development and design, market evaluation, styling, process and raw material improvement, and packing and distribution assistance covering village industry and handicraft products.”⁴⁷ The ICA contracted separately with Dave Chapman and his Design Research company in Chicago to survey craft in “first, Jamaica, Surinam, El Salvador, Costa Rica and Mexico in Latin America and the Caribbean; then Pakistan and Afghanistan later on.” Chapman completed initial survey trips by 1957, and then craft specialist Roy Ginstrom and marketing specialist Frank Carioti went “to establish a program of design assistance for the craftsmen of Iran,” and this team was “joined

⁴⁵ Fleishman, Avrom (1957). Design as a Political Force, Part 2. *Industrial Design*. 4 no. 4: 45-6.

⁴⁶ Esman, M. J (1957). Memo to ICA. RG 469. National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

⁴⁷ International Cooperation Administration (1955). Far East Demonstration Small Industry and Handicraft Development Project. RG 469 P 186 Box 31, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

by ceramicist Sergio Dello Strologo.”⁴⁸ The ICA program with Walter Dorwin Teague Associates involved Greece, Lebanon and Jordan, ⁴⁹ while Smith, Scheer & McDermott, Akron, Ohio, contracted to establish a Demonstration Center for woodworking, metalworking and ceramics in Seoul, South Korea.⁵⁰ Peter Muller-Munk Associates, Pittsburgh, worked in Turkey and opened a design studio in Haifa, Israel. However, its operations proved vulnerable to the Israel-Egyptian war.”⁵¹

For RWA, in South Vietnam, improving the lot of “the man-on-the-street” involved meeting with other men whose public significance flowed through their positions of managerial and governmental authority, such as “trade leaders and government ministers.” *Craft Horizons* conveyed the seriousness of these encounters,⁵² whereas *Interiors* laid out Wright’s business-approach. He deployed a methodology steeped in information-gathering that generated useful data to analyze for making recommendations to the State Department on whether to pursue the craft aid program with emphasis on exporting craft from South Vietnam to the United States. Moreover, before embarking, Wright undertook a survey.⁵³ *Craft Horizons* underscored Wright’s careful attention to gathering information.

Instead of simply packing his bags and bundling himself and a staff off for the orient, he sounded out 150 U.S. companies first on their interest in Southeast Asian products. Letters from the

⁴⁸ Brown, Conrad (1958). ICA’s technical assistance of U.S. industrial designers and U.S. Craftsmen promise some exciting results in their efforts to aid the Asiatic craftsman. *Craft Horizons*. 18 no. 4: 30ff.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁵⁰ Brown, ICA’s technical assistance. [*op. cit.*], 34-35.

⁵¹ Clabby, William. R. (1957). Expansive Uncle: U.S. Sends Designers To Native Huts to Lend A Hand to Handicrafters. *The Wall Street Journal*. July 5: 1, 12.

⁵² Brown, ICA’s technical assistance. [*op. cit.*], 33.

⁵³ Wright, Gold Mine in Southeast Asia. [*op. cit.*] 95.

companies, while encouraging, wanted to know a lot more about the subject. Import problems, quality standards and reliability of production flow were the sort of questions posed.⁵⁴

In aligning Wright with men having power in industry and commerce, comments like these ensured readers that Wright was not traveling for pleasure, relaxation, or sight-seeing. On top of this, the *Wall Street Journal* pegged Wright and his fellow industrial designers as intrepid explorer-discoverers.

By plane, jeep, train, canoe, camel, and on foot, members of a half dozen industrial design concerns have visited 19 nations – Greece, Jordan, Lebanon, Korea, India, Israel, Turkey, Formosa, Afghanistan, Surinam, Pakistan, Mexico, El Salvador, Jamaica, Costa Rica, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia and Hong King. Early trips are planned to Iran, Ceylon and Nepal.”⁵⁵

The newspaper reiterated that the success of their significant work followed from these professional men employing best business practices and judgement.

All the traveling, hundreds of thousands of miles in the past two years, is done so American industrial designers can determine what natives of many lands are capable of doing and what raw materials they have to work with. When visiting ‘huts and bazaars’ the designers shoot roll after roll of film photographing baskets, pottery, bowls and scores of other items from every angle. They fill notebooks with information on how native

⁵⁴ Brown, ICA’s technical assistance. [*op. cit.*] 33.

⁵⁵ Clabby, Expansive Uncle: U.S. [*op. cit.*], 1.

craftsmen carve, weave and hammer. Samples of handicrafts also are brought to this country for further study.”⁵⁶

Similarly, *Interiors* made sure readers knew Wright was not souvenir hunting or purchasing items for personal satisfaction.

Wright collected 1500 items on this tour and brought them home for display. These were not chosen always for their intrinsic value as well-designed objects but often in direct relation to the possibilities for economic improvement of the countries.”⁵⁷

All of Wright’s efforts, *Interiors* explains, were “rounded out by Wright’s candid personal diary of the expedition, plus the statistics he compiled sometimes with the help of (sometimes in spite of) ICA representatives, native officials, teachers, and other bigwigs who escorted him about.”⁵⁸

Once returned, Wright reflected on the “statistics he compiled” concerning craft labor (size of labor force), details of labor status (refugee or native), technology (hand, machine, factory), type of material or product, and availability in the US.⁵⁹ Wright organized an exhibition, although not for aesthetic or educational purposes. Rather, he used it to gather additional information from industry insiders and merchandisers about exporting Vietnamese craft.⁶⁰ The *New York Times*, extolling the craft aid project, would label it a “hard-headed business” as opposed to a “soft-hearted charity.”

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵⁷ Brown, Ica’s technical assistance. [*op. cit.*], 33.

⁵⁸ Wright, Gold Mine in Southeast Asia. [*op. cit.*], 95.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 94-101.

⁶⁰ Brown, Ica’s technical assistance. [*op. cit.*], 33.

There is something realistic and sensible about this whole project. The basic idea is to give help to Vietnam by helping the Vietnamese to help themselves. This is no soft-hearted charity. It is, as it ought to be, hard-headed business. Technical assistance should be made to pay dividends and this is one way of doing just that.⁶¹

Images of the designer diplomat

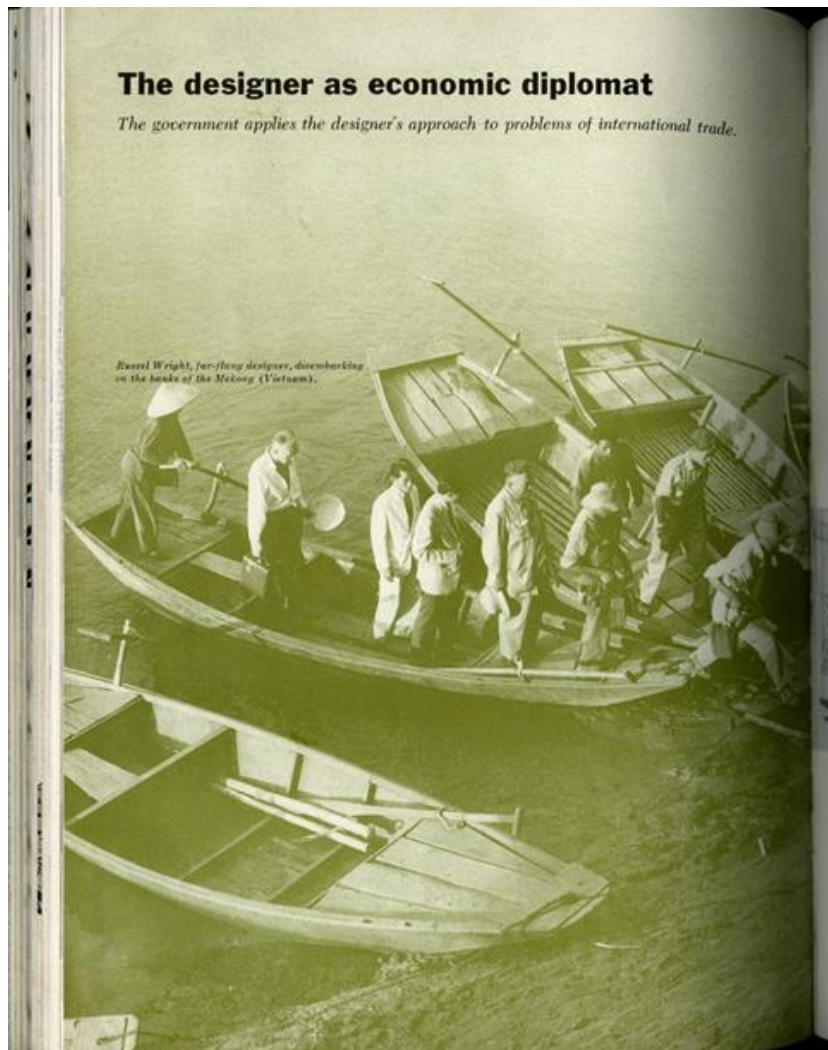
These ideals of masculinity manifest in photographs of Wright appearing in *Industrial Design* and *Interiors*, where they helped to “legitimate [his] power and privilege”⁶² to his American peers and an interested audience. Fleishman’s article began with a full page photograph showing Wright disembarking from a sampan in South Vietnam (**Fig. 2**). Behind Wright is an oarsman and ahead of him are staff and officials. With these and other men, Fleishman reports, Wright “explored the methods of production, trade restrictions and ability of the [Vietnamese craft] industry to handle the potential orders.”⁶³ The photograph alludes to the power of this cohort lacking any obvious references to women, busy as they are in approaching a foreign place to assess its importance for American Cold War agendas. Theirs was the journey-based work of “traveling, hundreds of thousands of miles in the past two years” “so American industrial designers can determine what natives of many lands are capable of doing and what raw materials they

⁶¹ Handicrafts from Vietnam (1958). *New York Times*. September 29, 26.

⁶² Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood*. [op. cit.], 5.

⁶³ Fleishman, *The Designer as Economic Diploma*. [op. cit.], 70.

have to work with.”⁶⁴ Their pre-mechanized mode of conveyance and the appearance of an entourage evokes mobility of the colonial era, when a district manager or knowledge specialist journeyed from a capital in country or on a longer journey from the imperial state to gather information and report findings to that authority.



[Fig. 2.] Unknown photographer, as published in Fleishman, Avrom. (1956). “The Designer as Economic Diplomat: The Government Applies the Designer’s Approach to Problems of International Trade.” *Industrial Design*. 3: 68.

⁶⁴ Clabby, *Expansive Uncle: U.S. [op. cit.]*, 1.

Interiors alluded to Wright's authority as a designer diplomat in other ways. For example, *Interiors* used photographs to reveal Wright's agency in naming, showing, and establishing the value of Vietnamese subjects for his profession's industries. RWA's contracts with the State Department called for products made by host countries to be exported and consumer products distributed there. Optimistically, in *Interiors*, Wright claimed, "Vietnam, where I expected to find little or nothing to export... is bursting with opportunities for the American importer or developer who goes there with designs and merchandising know-how."⁶⁵ In addition to documenting him making a basket, by including Huet's photograph of the refugee artisan, the article spliced Wright's diplomatic charge into his industrial design-authority, which he used to evaluate the worth of the artisan, show him to Americans, and convey how to capitalize on his skills (**Fig. 1**).

Interiors readers could see this occurring. Dressed in Western business casual clothing, kneeling in front of a large crowd of Vietnamese refugee children gathered behind him, Wright gazes at the artisan through his camera, as if rendering him visible, held forth to be scrutinized by magazine readers (**Fig. 1**).⁶⁶ The interplay between the images of Wright filming and the artisan weaving evokes colonial-era European paintings and photographs that conflate Western masculinity and whiteness with power over a subordinate colonial subject. In studying Orientalist French paintings, art historian Linda Nochlin analyzed their delivery of colonialism and sexualization by white men holding dark

⁶⁵ Wright, *Gold Mine in Southeast Asia*. [*op. cit.*], 100.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 94-5.

skinned natives and women in their view⁶⁷: “the white man, the Westerner, [as] always implicitly present in Orientalist paintings, controlling [the] gaze which brings the Oriental world into being, the gaze for which it is ultimately intended.”⁶⁸ Terence Heng reminds us that “racial theories of white superiority over non-whites were supported by the apparent positivistic ‘truthfulness’ of photographs” justifying “European expansionism around the world.”⁶⁹ In the case of Vietnamese craft, photographs conveyed artisans as having a certain importance to Americans, while they also implied that Americans had the power to determine what types of actions would be taken regarding the artisans.

However, the pages of *Interiors* didn’t merely convey the existence of the Southeast Asian artisan as discovered by the American designer and brought to the attention of his fellow citizens. Wright appears to witness the basket maker’s productivity, which his photograph conveys by capturing his quiet, ongoing weaving surrounded by a pile of finished and in-process baskets. The photograph’s emphasis on his work helps to domesticate the basket maker. It transposes him from being an unknown political liability existing beyond the reach of ordinary Americans, into a maker whose skills and demeanor satisfy RWA’s State Department charge concerning Vietnam. After all, RWA and Wright were meant to designate what types of craft would be welcome in the United States. By extension, they signaled to their

⁶⁷ Nochlin, Linda (1989). The Imaginary Orient, *Art in America*, May 1983, 118–131, 187–191, reprinted in: Nochlin, Linda (1989). *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society*, 33-59. New York: Harper and Row, 45.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁶⁹ Heng, Terence (2015). New forms of colonial gazing in Singaporean Chinese wedding photography. In: Koh, Adeline and Balasingamchow, Yu-Mei (eds.) (60-78), *Women and the politics of representation in Southeast Asia: Engendering discourse in Singapore and Malaysia*. London: Routledge, 60.

compatriots how artisans would be connected to the United States, which was tantamount to showing how they belonged in the Free World.

There is also the notion of Wright's vision as an organizing plan, a sense of the whole or a conceptualization. Historiographically, vision underpins the notion of greatness in the patrilineage of the history of art and design. As Buckley summarizes, "The history of design is reduced to a history of the designer, and the design is seen to mean and represent what the designer identifies."⁷⁰ For Wright, this concerned his assessment regarding how to develop Vietnamese craft for American consumption based on what he—not the artisan--surveys. The subject, the artisan, is what Wright shares with his "dominant group"⁷¹ of male colleagues, too. He amounts to what the title of the article, "Gold Mine in Southeast Asia," refers to as a gold mine. Upon discovering him, Wright assesses the value of the "mine" and invites his colleagues to take part in using him. "There are between 500,000 and 800,000 refugees in Vietnam eager to work but with little to do," a caption asserts.⁷² Mining and refining this human resource would be *Interior* magazine's intended readers, members of the design professions.⁷³

Following the first two pages of the article, additional photographs put forth more artisans as "opportunities." These photographs function slightly differently from the first. For one thing, none are as large. Also, they are organized in a grid composition spreading across two pages. A caption reads, "With guidance, these skillful hands can serve the

⁷⁰ Buckley, *Made in patriarchy*. [*op. cit.*], 10.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷² Wright, *Gold Mine in Southeast Asia*. [*op. cit.*], 100.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 5.

decorative trades and enable designers to carry out developmental experiments.”⁷⁴ The presentation of more than eight artisans multiplies these “hands” and implies the existence of a sizable, eager population awaiting Americans to direct them. As historian Peter Gatrell observed, refugees “are habitually portrayed as if they are without agency, like corks bobbing along on the surface of an unstoppable wave of displacement.”⁷⁵ Strategically, the photographs each represent one artisan at work, perhaps to avoid showing a group that Americans might feel anxious about being able to manage. Together, these photographs also convey a workforce that is diverse in its skill set. Whereas the full-page image of the basket maker signals the approachability of an artisan who is subject to a westerner and offers no resistance through his own action or looking, this workforce amounts to a catalog of types of craft from which an American home furnishings entrepreneur might select and then pursue by contacting RWA.

Patriarchy in design diplomacy spawned its others. As Buckley theorizes, the “resulting female stereotypes delineate certain modes of behavior as being appropriate for women.”⁷⁶ Yet, even as the masculinity of the designer diplomat spread through American mass print media, privileges of authority and agency associated with being an American in South Vietnam trumped gender inequalities among Americans.

In a series examining foreigners’ assessments of the United States based on Americans abroad, *Look* tracked “involuntary expatriates” who

⁷⁴ Wright, Gold Mine in Southeast Asia. [op. cit.], 98-99.

⁷⁵ Gatrell, Peter (2013). *The Making of the Modern Refugee*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 9.

⁷⁶ Buckley, Made in patriarchy. [op. cit.], 3.

worked diplomatically—“every one of us who goes abroad is an ambassador for our way of life.” One woman worked with home furnishings. Eliza Condin, formerly of Penn State University, signed on with the State Department’s ICA to serve as a home economist in Southeast Asia, “a jungle republic where American taxpayers have bet a great deal of money that the country will not be swallowed up by red China.”⁷⁷ Her profile— “Babies and Biscuits in the Jungle”—situates Condin in the home life—not journeying by sampan to survey native artisans. Among women and children in an unusual place, her activity reveals that feminine domains of American life endure no matter where one lives—“In Vietnam, Eliza has discovered that her job is basically the same as in Pennsylvania, but the work is harder.”⁷⁸ In the “jungle” of South Vietnam, Condin taught women about diet and family care.⁷⁹ Like Wright, she is an American with technical skills intending to aid underdeveloped Southeast Asians. To be sure, *Look* reinforced her work as belonging with women even in the “fields,” where she demonstrates cooking and bathes an infant while dressed in Western-style clothing, pearls, and toeless shoes. At home she relaxes with an iced drink served by her Vietnamese maid. “Eliza’s life in Vietnam is not all hardship. The ICA, for which she works, provides a comfortable rent-free apartment in Saigon and pays her \$8,000 a year. She has access to commissary groceries and nylons, and she pays her servant about \$7 a week, full time. She is doing work for which she is well trained, and she enjoys it in spite of the climate.”⁸⁰ Despite gendered differences in their

⁷⁷ Morrison, Chester (1957). Babies and Biscuits in the Jungle, *Look Americans Overseas*. No. 4: 111.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 115.

eminence and domains, Condin shared with Wright an ability to subject locals to their American aid projects.

Subjects of pathos and feminization

Of additional interest is that the photograph of the basket maker diminishes his masculinity and feminizes him, and so does a feminized discourse of pathos encode this artisan as a needy yet worthy, immobile, and approachable post-colonial subject. This element of his photograph relates to what Heng calls colonial gazing. Heng associates colonial photography with colonial gazing in ways that objectify subjects of the gaze and convey the new or unfamiliar to imperial audiences or respond more directly to commercial interests through romanticism or sentimentality. He notes a more contemporary manifestation: “White-Non-White is traded in for Male-Female” consisting of a gendered gaze that “appears to be more complicit and less offensive.”⁸¹ Although arguably not less complicit, across the first two pages of the *Interiors* article, “white-non-white” appears less as male-male and more as male-feminized male.

American State Department interests in Vietnamese refugees escalated with the signing of the Geneva Accords in July 1954. Then followed 300 days between August 1954 and May 1955 when people could regroup on either side of the 17th Parallel that ultimately would divide the south from the north. American media represented Vietnamese migrants as a proto-nation struggling and needing aid. Into this dramatic situation it added pathos to characterize migration and its aftermath. For example,

⁸¹ Heng, *New forms of colonial gazing in Singaporean Chinese wedding photography*. [*op. cit.*], 62.

Newsweek said migrants took to the water for perilous journeys,⁸² which amounted to a “pathetic exodus.”⁸³ Pathos also surfaced as a characteristic of Vietnamese refugees. His own publications as well as popular literature about Lt. Tom Dooley emphasized the human element of refugee suffering with emphasis on women and children. In Dooley’s first book, *Deliver us from Evil, The Story of Viet Nam’s Flight to Freedom*, black and white photographs featured refugees in northern Vietnamese processing camps, where Dooley treated their illnesses before they migrated south. Several featured children with women whose husbands were “slaughtered in the eight years of war” between the French and Vietnamese.⁸⁴ Historian Jessica Elkind says Dooley’s publications helped to galvanize U.S. policymakers and the American public in support of American intervention in the refugee episode. These photographs of suffering women and children lent a moral imperative to American assistance with Diem’s regime.⁸⁵

What Huet’s photograph of the basket maker shares with these representations is a desolate setting and an indigenous person who was on the move because he left community, family, and home in dire circumstances and now he awaits support in a camp. Intensified by the full size of the page, in its dramatic angles, black and white contrasts, quiet mood, and showing the artisan seated in a corner, the photograph intensifies the artisan’s isolation as pathos aiming for American reader affect. Moreover, his aloneness connotes vulnerabilities—social, perhaps economic as well as political. These, Americans feared, would

⁸² ‘Pilgrims’ of the East (1955). *Newsweek*. 45. January 24, 42, 44, 46.

⁸³ Indo-China, Tragic Flight (1954). *Newsweek*. 44. November 22, 56.

⁸⁴ Dooley, Thomas. A. (1956). *Deliver Us from Evil, The Story of Viet Nam’s Flight to Freedom*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy.

⁸⁵ Elkind, Jessica (2014). ‘The Virgin Mary is Going South’: Refugee Resettlement in South Vietnam, 1954-1956. *Diplomatic History*. 38 no. 5: 996.

compel refugees to seek aid from communists. Save for a reference to his camp on the adjacent page, the photograph also treats the artisan as anonymous. In his anonymity, his isolation nevertheless resonates the condition of hundreds of thousands more. As Gatrell realized, “the unnamed individual embodies the condition of refugees everywhere who cannot avoid their amalgamation into a collective category of concern.”⁸⁶

In *Interiors*, the composition of the article’s first two pages subjects the basket maker to Wright as pathetically passive insofar as he lacks any visible, active struggle regarding his homelessness. In comparison, across the page, Wright acts—he films to gather data. Maybe the reason Wright cannot be shown with the basket maker involves more than logistics, pointing instead to ambivalence on the part of Wright and the “dominant group” he represents. As Dean notes, “The U.S. national security managers sought to maintain imperial influence in Southeast Asia, but did so without a conceptual language that acknowledged the existence of an American empire.”⁸⁷ Nevertheless, there was a photographic language of empowerment and disempowerment to which these images reached--backwards, into the imaging of imperial power visiting the colony, and to western anthropologists photographically constituting their subjects of study in terms of non-western differences, and contemporaneously, to discourses of gendered power in design as well as discourses of looking associated with the American middle class.

To this last point, the compositional suturing of Wright’s filming to the artisan’s withdrawal into his work associates Wright’s camera and the

⁸⁶ Gatrell, *Making of the Modern Refugee*. [op. cit.], 5, 10.

⁸⁷ Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood*. [op. cit.], 202.

rectangular shape of the magazine page “containing” the artisan with what historian Anna Creadick says are among the surveillance and performance tools intensifying throughout mid-century suburbia. Multiplying in picture windows and television sets, suburban living was fostering American habits of using hardware and technology to watch neighbors and the world.⁸⁸ As suburbia whitened the middle class, and with the majority of new housing built in suburbs during the 1950s, increasingly, suburbia signified America, middle class, and whiteness as normative.⁸⁹ Correspondingly, *Interiors* offered technology-enabled looking, with the full size of the photograph serving as an invitation to magazine readers to surveil Wright, Wright’s subject, and Wright’s whiteness bearing upon him.

What makes the basket maker all the more approachable to those looking at him are the additional ways the photograph diminishes his masculinity and agency, arcing towards feminization. His smooth face and body, shiny hair not clearly cut yet not visibly styled to curve away from his face, his quietness and subtle engagement in detailed hand work as opposed to powering a hammer or shovel, combine to distinguish him from other artisans exhibiting markers of masculinity in the same article, such as a man with a beard and a muscular, bare chested man shoveling kaolin.⁹⁰ They also distinguish him from a group of active young men seated cross-legged on the ground, their arm muscles visible as they pound dye into silk (**Fig. 3**).

⁸⁸ Creadick, Anna. G. (2010). *The Pursuit of Normality in Postwar America*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 118.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁹⁰ Wright, Gold Mine in Southeast Asia. [*op. cit.*] 98-99.



[Fig. 3.] Photograph by Henri Gilles Huet as published in Wright, Russel (1956). Gold Mine in Southeast Asia. *Interiors* 116 no. 1: 100.

In comparison, the lack of these features in the basket maker somewhat infantilizes him, leaving him not less experienced but appearing less mature—younger—than anyone else in the article.

V. Spike Peterson argues that economically, “feminization devalorizes not only women but also racially, culturally, and economically marginalized men and work that is deemed unskilled, menial, and

'merely' reproductive."⁹¹ His gender elided, neutralized if not feminized, his maturity diminished, the indigenous, anonymous refugee artisan appears to pose little threat to those Americans who would approach in hopes of avoiding the eroticization associated with the Asian female body of western popular culture or the power of men who could become aggressors. Yet, based on Wright's lead, interested Americans could see in the artisan the vitality of a highly skilled craft tradition reproduced through his activity, which made him valuable. Ultimately, the artisan's pathos and vulnerability made him approachable and best stewarded by those with know-how. Wright represented the resolution to his need by representing a nation of masculinized "industrial know-how" designers surmising how "people of the Orient" can live in relation to the United States. Interviewed before he traveled to Southeast Asia, Wright stated: " 'We are a country of industrial know-how, of skilled machine production, but nobody has the time here to make things by hand. This is where the people of the Orient can cash in on their skills. There, millions of people are dependent on their handskills for a livelihood'."⁹² Anthropologist Manning Nash characterized that type of power as a one way flow of information and culture:

One of the aspects of the industrialization of Western production is the modern species of culture contact which diffuses the industrial way to the remotest corners of the world. This spread

⁹¹ Peterson, V. Spike. (2009). Gendered Economies in the Asia-Pacific. In: D'Costa, Bina and Lee-Koo, Katrina (eds.). *Gender and Global Politics in the Asia-Pacific*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 41.

⁹² Roe, Dorothy (1956). Designers Tour Far East. *The Washington Post and Times Herald* February 1, 41.

of the industrial West brings social and technological complexity into remote cultural and social environments.⁹³

Wright aspired to bring what he conceived as an appropriate level of complexity to Vietnamese craft while safeguarding its “handskills.”

Something else empowered Wright and his team while diminishing the agency of artisans. As Louise Edwards and Mina Roces observe, in the history of American-Asian relationships, and from the perspective of those in power, “dress was regarded as a marker of a particular people’s level of civilization” and then as a sign of a nation’s modernity.⁹⁴ In contrast, “the naked human body in varying states of undress remained a central signifier of marginal political status and lack of civilization.”⁹⁵ Throughout the article, Wright and his male colleagues signify power without having to revert to military attire. As new types of a diplomat who hail from civic society, they wear Western professional white-collar business suits (**Fig. 2**), or Wright removes his jacket (**Fig. 1**) and rolls up his sleeves, indicating that he is involved in his work (**Fig. 3**). According to Creadick, the suit and middle classism performed status: “wearing a suit meant being middle-class; being middle-class meant wearing as a suit”⁹⁶ in the context of whiteness and middle-classness as normality.⁹⁷ So outfitted, Wright and Alexander

⁹³ Nash, Manning (1955). Some Notes on Village Industrialization in South and East Asia, *Economic Development and Cultural Change*. 3 no. 3, April, 271.

⁹⁴ Edwards, Louise and Roces, Mina (2007). Trans-national flows and the politics of dress in Asia and the Americas. In: Roces, Mina and Edwards, Louise (eds.), *The Politics of Dress in Asia and the Americas*. Brighton, England, and Portland, Oregon: Sussex Academic, 7-8.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁹⁶ Creadick, *The Pursuit of Normality in Postwar America*. [op. cit.], 68.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

tower over young male dye pounders seated on the ground, their torsos and legs, bare (**Fig. 3**).

Differences of comportment widen the gaps between the two groups. The men stand to observe the artisans while the artisans sit beneath them, working as they are observed. These differences evoke the trope of Western male authority journeying to the interior of a non-western place to study natives in their natural habitat with the intention of capitalizing on their findings. It puts American forays into Vietnam in a familiar albeit broader context of colonial-era Western travel and discovery in the East, perhaps to deflect more problematic topical contexts, such as the Cold War. As Liisa Malki observes, “Thus does the nakedness of the ideal typical refugee suggest another link: that between nationlessness and culturelessness.”⁹⁸ Authorized by his gendered professional status and that of his peers, it went to Wright, as a designer diplomat, to undertake the task of restoring culture to refugees who lost a nation and fled to a newly forming one.

“the stakes of diplomacy”

In distinguishing industrial from post-industrial economy and society, Susan Buck Morss situates the former in Cold War alliances embedding political in economic power⁹⁹ on two counts: “the depersonalization of exchange” that freed American consumers from personal connections with producers, one another, and consumer goods,¹⁰⁰ and the politics of

⁹⁸ Malkki, Liisa H. (1992). National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity among Scholars and Refugees. *Cultural Anthropology*. 7 no. 1: 34.

⁹⁹ Buck-Morss, Susan. (1995). Envisioning Capital: Political Economy on Display. *Critical Inquiry*. 21: 436.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 437-438.

a new American imperialism that “allowed the soothingly comprehensible vision of polities as bound together by economic fate.”¹⁰¹ She traces “the economic notion of a collective based on the depersonalized exchange of goods”¹⁰² historically, to Adam Smith, who described a social body “composed of things, a web of commodities circulating in an exchange that connects people who do not see or know each other” and differentiates nations having things and those without.¹⁰³

During the mid-1950s, craft aid efforts on the part of the State Department led to American industrial designers such as Wright and his firm helping to bind nations without mass produced things, such as South Vietnam, to the United States as a nation having things, by applying modern design features to native craft so the craft would appeal to American merchandisers and consumers. As a result, Americans would have more things, Vietnamese likely would not, and the status quo would remain. In the mass print American media of craft and design, not the craft object, rather, the Vietnamese artisan figured a world not-yet industrialized or modernized in contrast to “the social body of [modern American] civilization [that] is impersonal, indifferent to that fellow-feeling that within a face-to-face society causes its members to act with moral concern.”¹⁰⁴ Yet, brought into the Americanized world of the “depersonalization of exchange,” one that was overly industrialized and mechanized, according to Wright, the work of Vietnamese artisans offered Americans respite for their lack of connections to natural materials, organic shapes, and craft objects. It

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 438.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 439.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 450.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 452.

was born of the hovering American design supervisor conveying a new American imperialism that “allowed the soothingly comprehensible vision of polities as bound together by economic fate”¹⁰⁵ —one learns to make what the other needs and takes.

The photograph of the craft maker invited Americans to see their nation’s incorporation of South Vietnam into this equation of the “Free World,”¹⁰⁶ shepherded by its “cultural and discursive systems through which graphic images [were] appraised, interpreted, and assigned historical, scientific, and aesthetic worth.”¹⁰⁷ Also incumbent upon this photograph in offering a “soothingly comprehensible vision of polities as bound together” was the need to address American anxieties about Vietnamese as warmongering and the realization that many Southeast Asians perceived Americans as unwelcome outsiders.

As journalist William Attwood summarized, “We are outsiders, no matter how disciplined and well-behaved. We are like the houseguest who stays on and on. What American community would want to play permanent host to a bunch of clannish and often patronizing foreigners who don’t even bother to learn English?”¹⁰⁸ The possibility that Vietnamese did not wish to play host to “clannish and often patronizing foreigners” who didn’t speak their language intensified other anxieties. The former Hungarian diplomat Stephen Kertesz warned his new American countrymen,

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 438.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 440.

¹⁰⁷ Poole. *Vision, Race, and Modernity: A Visual Economy of the Andean Image World*. [*op. cit.*], 10.

¹⁰⁸ Attwood, William (1957). Are We Making Any Friends. *Look Americans Overseas*. No. 4: 116.

In recent decades an anti-colonial movement has been sweeping through Asia and Africa. The ascendancy of Europe and the white race, taken for granted in the nineteenth century, is no longer passively accepted. Some colonial people are eager to retaliate for alleged or real injustices. The anti-colonial feeling sometimes generates obsessions which make reasonable political orientation and actions difficult.”¹⁰⁹

Would refugees in South Vietnam turn against American aid? Would they join Vietminh forces and retaliate against Americans for the ills of western imperialism? Would they repatriate to join communists in the north?

In the larger picture, American Cold War rhetoric was responding to a perceived threat to Western power: “the stakes of diplomacy are now immensely greater than at any time in the past” due largely to the “Communist empire,” in other words, “the most formidable aggressive dictatorship the world has ever known. It is waging a merciless ‘cold war’ against all free societies.”¹¹⁰ That a potential enemy could achieve “unchallenged superiority in all elements of political, military, and economic power”¹¹¹ further fueled concern regarding the political liabilities of refugees. Would they push Vietnam to become like Korea and Germany, dividing and losing territory and populations to communism?¹¹² The *New York Times* said South Vietnam was unstable because a “network of Vietminh agents” wanted to influence refugees

¹⁰⁹ Kertesz, Stephen. D. (1959). Diplomacy in the Atomic Age: Part I. *The Review of Politics*. 21 no. 1 Twentieth Anniversary Issue: II, 175.

¹¹⁰ Merchant, Livingston. T. (1954). The New Environment of American Diplomacy. *Department of State Bulletin*. 31 no. 804, 759.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 760.

¹¹² Durdin, Tillman. (1955). Divided Vietnam—Comparison after one year. *The New York Times* July 17, E4.

and peasants there to accept the Communist regime in the north.¹¹³ Leland Barrows, Director of the United States Operations Mission in Vietnam, noted the imperative to document refugees by recording their “occupational skills, educational backgrounds, and political beliefs.” He cautioned, “Without this information, the Communist Vietminh can infiltrate the resettlement areas and continue to stir up strife and unrest among all the people throughout South Vietnam.”¹¹⁴

The dearth of attention to images concerning design and craft in American Cold War diplomacy warrants considering the photographs discussed in this essay, including on questions of how they introduced the refugee artisan into the politics of American diplomacy. These photographs cannot be divorced from an American need to assert power in South Vietnam through the authority of the industrial designer who was active there on behalf of his nation and its consumers. What they have yet to reveal is the agency of their subjects in responding to American efforts not simply at salvage but also at cooperation—subjects whom the photographs depict, and those whom the photographs are meant to represent in South Vietnam and throughout the additional nations of Southeast Asia having interest to the United States.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, E4.

¹¹⁴ Barrows, Leland (1955). Report on Resettlement of Evacuees South of the Seventeenth Parallel. RG 469, Box 20, UD 130. National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

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