



FORM AND FUNCTION

Helsinki-based Ugandan designer Lincoln Kayiwa creates beautiful solutions to daily problems.

Rebekka Harju

I FIRST saw the work of **Lincoln Kayiwa** in the Master of Arts exhibition in 2008. I was immediately taken with his aesthetic and functional sterling silver *Tukaani* chopsticks, designed for the more butterfingered western consumers of Asian food. Easy to use and beautiful to behold, it is indicative of the kind of approach to design Kayiwa cultivates, from his *Rose* wine glass to the playful *Dino* clothes rack.

Kayiwa's innovative products have received international attention – and praise: *Dino* was elected by the New York Times as one of last fall's most interesting new products.

Ugandan-born Kayiwa came to Finland in 2001 as a student from Makerere University in Kampala.

He graduated as a Master of Arts from the University of Art and Design Helsinki (UIAH) and now operates his own design company. I sat down with Kayiwa in his Helsinki office to get more insight into the cultural mix behind his unique design aesthetic.

What, if anything, do you consistently draw inspiration from?

My design is a result of finding a solution to something or for the betterment of something by placing my signature to it. With my designs I supplement the way we live. I get inspiration from both living and non-living things.

What comes first for you – designing an object or your knowledge of the materials you work with?

I cannot think of the material alone. The product or the idea of the product comes first.

Tell me about your background: What inspired you to become a designer?

Besides being born into an architectural family, there are a number of other separate incidents that inspired me to

become a designer. However, I really got interested in design when doing my Bachelor of Arts at Makerere University in Uganda. We had a visiting professor from Central Michigan University, **David Stairs**, who lectured us about postmodern design. Through the same lectures I was introduced to different work, for instance **Alvar Aalto's** architecture and **Paul Rand's** graphic design. Specifically, I like **Philippe Starck's** early work such as the *Juicy Salif* for Alessi and the *POAA* Dumbbells. The examples above prove that good design can be both humorous and serious.

How have you adapted to life here in Finland?

I have always been knowledgeable of the fact that social norms vary – be it in Finland or elsewhere – even among the many tribes in my home country. I just had to adapt to the “Finnishness” as fast as possible. You know how the saying goes, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do!”

What is your relationship to Finnish/Nordic design?

I like **Stefan Lindfors' Ego** cup, **Eero Aarnio's Ball Chair** and **Pony**, **Harri Koskinen's Finlandia** bottle design, and brands such as Fiskars and Suunto. However, at the moment I am much more interested in talented upcoming designers.

What do you think about Finnish design education and the position of Finnish designers abroad?

What I felt was lacking in Finnish design education should be corrected by the soon-to-be-launched Aalto University: the design graduates will also have better business and entrepreneurial skills. Insufficient marketing has somehow affected the current position of Finnish designers and the whole Finnish brand abroad.

What does your work offer to society?

Just like any other product that I design, it has to be innovative, aesthetic and fully functional. As an example, the *Tukaani* chopsticks are a solution for many who cannot effectively use traditional chopsticks. Unlike the disposable wooden chopsticks, *Tukaani* is hand washable: the re-usability being the environmentally friendly aspect to the product. There's also no splinters. Other functional highlights include the matte surface and taut movement that allow a steady grip for the hand. The curl at the end of the *Tukaani* provides easy food picking and delivery to the mouth. The loop also allows easier hanging, storage and display. They are much easier to place on and use at the table as they do not roll about.

I see your designs as functional artwork, specifically as conceptual works of art. For example *Tukaani* – a bird/eating device, *Rose* – a flower/picnic glass, *Dino* – a skeleton/clothes rack and so on.

I consider myself a designer. Compared to art, design has to be functional and aesthetic. It is also more conventional because art could range from realism to abstract and so forth. One may achieve the same with design as long as they remain true to the elements and principles of design. When people interpret my designs as artwork as well, I take it as a compliment.

In what ways do you stretch yourself to develop your work?

Through the pursuit of perfection! I sacrifice a lot of time and resources to achieve the best result.

How does the process of creating a design object begin?

The process usually starts by

either identifying a problem or simply letting the ideas come to me. For the former, although a design object may have been nicely made, it might not necessarily fulfil its intended purpose. My focus would then be to make it better. I make the initial sketches by hand because I like the “organic feel” more than 3D graphic sketches. However, in business presentations hand-made sketches are not considered “professional” enough so I have them done in 3D computer graphics.

What helps in creating a suitable environment for design work?

Personally, the working environment does not affect me much. For instance, now that I have to cater to all the marketing, distribution and other tasks, there's hardly any time to let ideas flow freely through me because the chores consume both my time and energy. I used to be a lot more creative but now I'm not as progressive in that sense. But, on the other hand, every situation can lead to serendipitous results – even stressful moments.

Given the option of placing your design work in either a home of an anonymous collector or in an institution such as a museum, which would you prefer and why?

By using a design object, the user gives it its own story or “life” for that matter. I do not really mind who uses my designs and in whichever way they choose as long as it gives satisfaction to the user. The real value of any design object should be that value which is assigned to it by the user.

As a designer, how do you feel your move to Finland has affected you – both in a positive and negative way?

Generally, I am more optimistic in the sense that I try to concentrate more on the advantages than the disadvantages. After all, in the broader

sense, every advantage has a negative side to it and vice versa. I like it that in Finland I have more room to innovate, focus and reflect.

What things do you miss from home?

Family and friends! I do travel to Uganda every now and then though. On the other hand, it feels much closer due to the ease of correspondence by either phone or e-mail.

How do you manage to balance your work with “normal” life?

It has been surprisingly easy to integrate work and home life. Currently I am either at my office or at home with my family. I try to spend as much time with my 17-month-old son as I can. The luxury of my trade is that I do not necessarily have to be seated at my desk to work. If anything, I prefer to reflect on the ideas in progress and/or think of new ideas when I am out of the office.

What is the most common question that you get as a designer?

Besides the usual questions, people are interested about my cultural background. In many ways, my work is influenced by my Ugandan background.

Name something from your cultural background that comes out in your work.

In my upcoming porcelain collection I am modernising tradition by designing a tableware set based on an old Ugandan tradition of using the same earthenware drinking vessel for water, milk, beer or wine.

What is it about your products that you wish people could just understand?

At times people just have to get “it!” Users should also explore, “appreciate” the design product themselves. If **Picasso** had to explain every bit of his

work, I do not think that it would perhaps have been as endearing as it was or is.

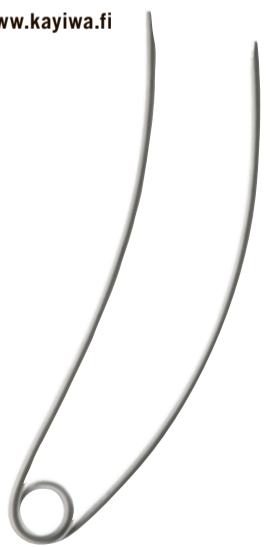
Where can we buy your products?

In Finland my products may be bought at Design Forum Shop and Galleria Norsu. I am also currently building an international distribution network.

What is the ideal scenario for you in ten year's time?

It does not really matter how many units I sell as long as I can still comfortably practice as a designer, enjoy the things that I love and have time for my family. If I make millions while I'm at it then that would be a bonus.

www.kayiwa.fi



Lincoln Kayiwa

Birthdate and place: 1979
Kampala, Uganda

Place of residence:
Etu-Töölö, Helsinki

Education: Master of Arts

Family: My fiancé and son

As a child I wanted to be... a detective.

I hope... the world will be a better place.

I hate... gimmicky things.

In five year's time I will be... five years older.