



Future Primitive

A glimpse into the world of Ross Lovegrove

By Alex Arthur

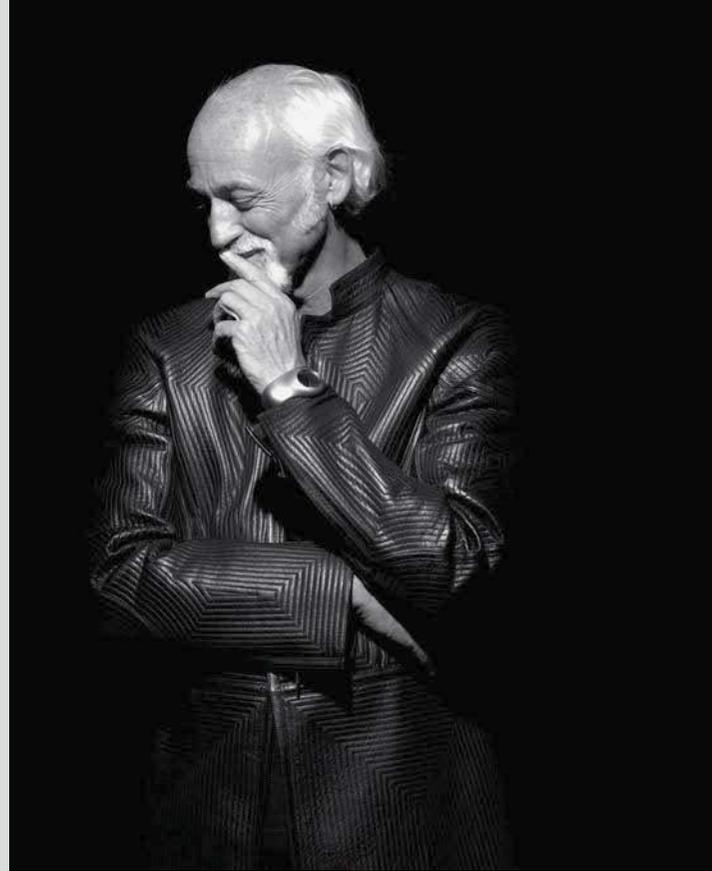
Ross Lovegrove is an innovative designer/sculptor of international renown based in London. As a tribal art collector, Ross is eclectic but highly aesthetic in his choices, which usually combine material, form, and function. I met him in his high-tech studio in Notting Hill Gate, where contemporary design items mingle comfortably with prehistoric tools and bone implements ... among other things.

When did you become aware of tribal art? Was it before or after discovering your vocation as a designer of modern tools?

Think of a raw confrontational coastal landscape of primordial stratification and a very earthy sea. That's a memory I have of being at one with the elements from my childhood on the ancient coastline of South Wales, stretching from Lavernock Point to Swanbridge and way on to Nash Point. Where I come from, one can walk a beach piled high in pebbles and realize that despite the billions of shapes, each one fits the hand. It's the concept of erosion, that time and friction can shape not only our space but the things we touch. These are forms that ar-

FIG. 1: Ross Lovegrove wearing an Alexander McQueen tooled-leather Maori Coat and his Hu watch for Issey Miyake Japan.

Photo: John Ross.



rive from a slow fashioning, often soft in outline or organic in the same way that very, angular sharp materials can become tactile and sensual through use.

The concept of abstraction that gripped my thoughts when picking out fossils from the mud or seeing prehistoric deer footprints in the rock also relates to tricks of how to see form more clearly, such as waiting for the sun to fall lower in the sky or rain to fill cavities in stone. These are things I remember well and often revisit. Today this polarization continues from both directions, analog into digital one might say in modern terms, in my contemporary work here in my studio. So, your question could well be rephrased to ask when and where were those very first nascent experiences that concentrated my mind on natural forces, time, technology, and abstraction?

But, leading back to the original question: My first awareness of tribal art came out of my awareness of nature, then consequently by seeing it in an early photo of Picasso's studio and later experiencing the *Elephant Skull* series of etchings by Henry Moore when I began in art school in the '70s. It slowly dawned on me that tribal art permeated the studios of most of the great painters and sculptors of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This is common knowledge today, but as someone entering the field of art and design at that time it seemed like a revelation because, as it was for those artists, for me it was a genesis moment in the qualification of abstraction. This was later borne out in the work of the Memphis Group in Milan, who broke free from in-

FIG. 2 (lower left): The Coastline of Wales; Flatholm Island.

Photo: John Ross.

FIG. 3 (right): Lovegrove Studio; comparing two 3D prints of his latest project based on ancient Silex.

Photo: Alex Arthur.





FIGS. 5 & 6: "Bone chair"
by Ross Lovegrove for
Ceccotti Spa, Pisa, Italy.

Willow and carbon fiber.
Photo: John Ross.



FIG. 4: A selection of objects from the
"shelves" in the office.

- A An ivory fertility object from the Lega, DR Congo.
- B Knife in stainless steel designed by Ross Lovegrove for Williams-Sonoma, USA.
- C Scandinavian amber, c. 4500 BC. Ex Dr. A. H. Stamp Coll.
- D Stereolithographic 3D print of human bone structure.
- E "BIOFORM," wood sculpture by Ross Lovegrove, 1995.
- F Toposa bone pendant, Sudan: for partnered cattle.
- G Shell fetish (*Fusus* sp.) from the Fon, Benin.
- H Human bone spatula, 19th C. Vanuatu (New Hebrides).
- I Ming-Style Spine by Shao Fan, Beijing, 2008
- J Ceremonial weapon for battling with a lion, Masai, Kenya.
- K Ancient and distressed bone bracelet from the Gurunsi people of Burkina Faso.





FIG. 7: Detail of Eso shield acquired in Paris in the '90s.

Photo: John Ross.



FIG. 10: "Eye Camera," Olympus Optical, Japan.

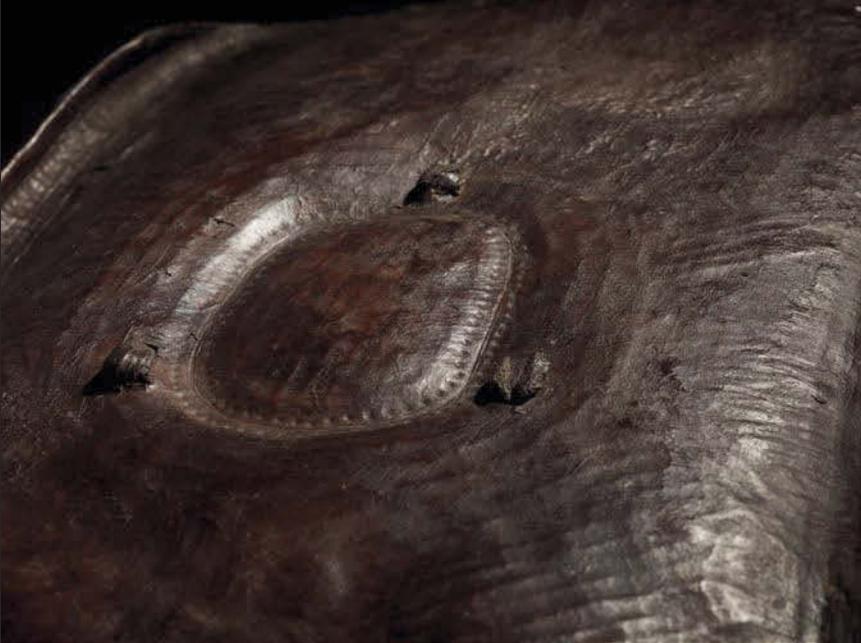
Photo: John Ross.



FIGS. 8 & 9: "Cetacea" chaise lounge. Limited Edition of 3, 2006.

Photos: John Ross.





dustrial logic and designed instead on behalf of humanity with a deconstructed “primal geometry” approach to form. I felt a powerful sculptural approach emerging in design, like the rock formations in Wales. There are layers and strata that at this point in time melded other factors, such as new processes in manufacturing, material morphology, and science, as well as the human dimension of anatomical and ergonomic design, most notably in furniture.

Aside from those items that represent structure and design, you also collect African shields.

Why?

It’s similar. But with shields I find that the direct reference to body form in some African woven shields is very sensual. One can sometimes identify a parallel of human form, as if the shield was molded over the skin, thus becoming a “second skin” that both reveals and conceals in the duality of its function.

All types seem to bear anatomical references in the way they are held and in their “second skin” materials. Then, there is weight and balance, which in certain ways remind me of modern fashion and luggage, as lightness and structure converge.

Equally, the molding of leather is so incredibly sensual. Think of an Ethiopian hide shield molded over a wooden structure. Transforming an elastic organic material—stripped from an animal—in this way is an omnipresent continuing act. Although they are taken to a higher level of skill and technology, today’s shoes and their immaculate precision can cause the resonance of primal consciousness and instinct to return to me powerfully.

This is amplified by the fact that the shield is in many cases held to protect a naked body and, for us, images of this further focus the function of the shield to be both a protector of our assumed vulnerability in nudity and also in the act of physical conflict. Of course, today there is a massive distance from the origin of the material to the

FIGS. 11–14 (clockwise from top left): **Selection of African shields: Kundu, Mofu, Masai, Kirdi/Falli(?).**

Photos: John Ross.



FIG. 15 (left): **"Cosmic Angel," suspended light by Ross Lovegrove for Artemide Spa, Milan, Italy.**

Photo: John Ross.

FIG. 16 (below): **"Lovegrove's Legendary Sketchbooks" in tooled leather containing numerous ideas for design, architecture, and art.**

Photo: John Ross.

finished article, but leather as formed in African tribal art has astonishing power and presence, and I'm drawn to this. Aside from that, when one holds a shield, a change of state occurs, as if there is a psychic sensorial connection from past to present, an ancestral gesture reinstated.

As a designer, I see affinities between woven grass or wicker shields and the armor of Japanese Samurai warriors, for example. I think this is because of the mélange of considered materials and the succinctness of selection in relation to lightness and durability. It is craft at its apex, whereby making functional things was both a noble art as well as a necessity. In a contemporary sense one can see great beauty in the purpose of material selection, just as lightweight carbon and Kevlar composites are clear traces of the evolution of process and textile design.

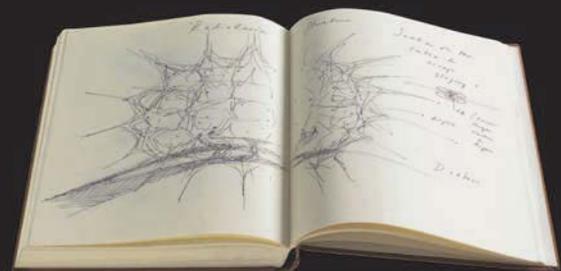
To take an Azande wicker shield from Sudan and recreate it in carbon fiber would result in the most extraordinary of objects, shifting its cultural origin but without losing its soul, because its subtlety of anatomical body reference would remain intact and uninterrupted in our deeper consciousness!

Lastly, in your book, you use the term "organic essentialism" as a sort of guiding force. How do you define it?

It's my philosophy toward design that has taken a lifetime to formulate as the guiding philosophical principle

FIGS. 17–19 (top to bottom): **African tribal shields: Oromo (Galla Tribe), Arusi, Ethiopia; Keaka, Cross River region, Cameroon; Ometto/Amarro, SW Ethiopia.**

Photos: John Ross.



in my work. In essence, the term "organic" relates to my thought process, which is a three-dimensional poly-mathic way of creating neural linkages between objects and all things past, present, and future.

So ultimately it's more of a phenomenology, the expression of form that unites all in its balance and harmony. When one stands next to a Henry Moore plaster reclining figure, *Cloud Gate* by Kapoor, a cetacean skeleton at the Natural History Museum, or a glass bench by Tokujin Yoshioka, one's body seems to expand with the incredible impact of emotional forces that generate an invisible energy between man and object. This is something I see both as prelinguistic and a universal past, present, and future—a primordial continuum.

"Essentialism" is using nothing more and nothing less than is required. This relates to mass and the economics of construction totally harmonized with the principles of nature ... things created with intrinsic and extrinsic forces to grow only to a point of arrest, whereby the work reaches a certain immaculate conception in material, mass, and stature. In such three-dimensional harmonics—energy in/energy out—all these fuse effortlessly. It's also a dimension that relates wholeheartedly to the economics of objects: fat-free design that embraces contemporary global humanitarian issues of resources and ecology. These resonate deep within material culture and impact the meaning and value of what we produce. Human endeavor and the resourcefulness of turning such limited organic material like grass into a shield or ivory into a pounder ... Incredible! I have a deep respect for the "rights of passage" starting in Swabia some 42,000 years ago with a mammoth-bone flute and arriving today in my pizio electric touch screen iPhone or my Eye Camera for Olympus in Japan.

Further reading:

Supernatural: The Work of Ross Lovegrove
Phaidon Press, London 2004.

