

# **Swedish Memories**

1955 – 2007

a life in product-design

by

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profession but with hindsight I am sure the year spent looking after the home was an extremely valuable experience and very useful for my work later on when I was heavily involved in the design of household goods and kitchen appliances.

### 1958 -1962 ■▲■●■ **Sason**

With the birth of our second child it became increasingly obvious that I would have to bring in more income than I had so far been able to. I started to make inquiries about employment in an industrial design office again and this time I was in luck. I visited the newly opened office of Rune Mono, AB Indutridesign, near Stureplan in central Stockholm but they had no vacancies, I tried the Stockholm office of "Bernadotte and Björn" (the main office was in Copenhagen) in Högdalen, a southern suburb and got the same reply and then I tried one of the "lone wolves". Sixten Sason had what he called his studio on the top floor of his two-storey flat situated in Solna, a northern suburb and he needed an assistant. Sixten had been in the design business since the late thirties. He had also done a vast amount of technical and futuristic illustration for a number of magazines and newspapers. He was very much a "loner" and somewhat bohemian. The son of a sculptor, he had his artistic training in Paris but, confronted with the need to be able to communicate with mechanical engineers when working on an assignment designing motor-cycles, he took a course of mechanical engineering himself. For me, it was a very exciting time. There were three main clients - Electrolux in Stockholm, manufacturing amongst other things vacuum-cleaners, floor-polishers and outboard-motors, Husqvarna Vapenfabriken in Huskvarna, two-hundred miles south, who made kitchen appliances, sewing-machines, chain-saws and motor-cycles and Saab in Trollhättan, not far from Gothenburg, who made cars. Sixten spent most of his time divided equally between these three companies which meant travelling great distances, always by car. I was mostly in the studio in Solna doing what I had been wanting to do for a very long time. He spoke very little English so my Swedish was improving rapidly especially as I also had quite a lot of contact with the clients. The process of developing new products was perhaps somewhat less complicated in the late fifties than it became later; there seemed to

be fewer people involved and less committee work. It was probably less democratic as well. The products tended to be the brain-child of a small group of enthusiasts rather than the end-product of a product-development system. Working on assignments for Electrolux, I quickly had to learn the constraints of several manufacturing techniques such as aluminium die-casting and injection moulding of various different plastics. I also learned the power of good presentation with suitable perspective renderings or exact models and mock-ups. Sixten knew that the elderly male Electrolux directors appreciated the opposite sex so when presenting new ideas for vacuum-cleaners he would produce a beautifully coloured perspective drawing of a pert young house-maid using the new product. Not a suitable presentation technique for the equality-conscious! Much of our work for Electrolux was done at the research department rather than the studio.

Sixten had a permanent place in one of the offices with a desk and a drawing-board. The office was shared with Ture Lindahl, then responsible for developing new nozzles and attachments but later part of Electrolux own design team. I sometimes worked in that office for a week at a time and it was my first and only experience of being part of a large drawing office and taking part in the daily life of a large company even to the extent of clocking in and out, punching a card morning and evening. This experience was also a very useful in preparing me to understand and work with engineers in the years to come.

The vacuum-cleaners of the fifties were still made of a rolled steel cylinder with plastic ends and metal runners instead of wheels but we were working on ideas completely in plastics and equipped with varying numbers of wheels for manoeuvrability. We had worked out that a cleaner on four wheels would be easier to manoeuvre than one on two or three wheels, a theory we were able to prove with the help of mock-ups but four wheels are more expensive than three so the idea was rejected. One of my first designs to reach production was actually a face-lift on a vacuum-cleaner manufactured at the Electrolux factory in Luton (England), the model "sixty-five". Apart from a more modern appearance it had the innovation of a special horizontal groove at the rear end which in combination

with a transverse handle eased the winding and storing of the cord. This was a cheaper way of storing the cord than an automatic winder and one that has since appeared on many vacuum-cleaners, but I think we were first. As this was a "face-lift", I had wanted to change the appearance as much as possible and my first proposal was to turn the slightly triangular body upside-down with the narrow side down to make place for a couple of large wheels. I have always appreciated the fact that Ove Werner, at that time the chief engineer, allowed us to experiment and approved the production of a mock-up even though he must have known it would be rather too expensive to manufacture. We also spent a lot of time on the design of hand-held vacuum-cleaners to be manufactured in France. These had to be very light and apart from the electric motor were made completely in plastics. Knowledge of plastics was increasing all the time and one material, polyurethane foam, which we now know can be an environmental hazard, was being hailed as the perfect insulation material for Electrolux refrigerators and it certainly was far superior to earlier insulating materials. Polyurethane foam was also being used for crash-pads in cars, moulded into a preformed skin and we thought this could be a good idea for making vacuum-cleaners too. The idea was to shape the cleaner like a soft bag on wheels. The bag would contain the mechanics of motor, fan and filter but also have space for all the attachments as well. Being soft it would not scrape doors or furniture and since it consisted mainly of foam it would also be very light. Several mock-ups and even a prototype were made. It would not have been particularly expensive to make but it was probably too different from existing vacuum cleaners and never reached production.

Getting the design right for the time is a crucial part of developing new products. Designers have been known to complain of a lack of understanding from clients or the market, but the fact remains that if the product is not right the customer will not buy it, not even if it happens to have been awarded a prize for excellent design. Being too "advanced" or different from what the customer is expecting can be as big a mistake as being too old-fashioned. Prizes for good design tend to be awarded by juries consisting of the designer's peers namely other designers who usually think in terms of designs and shapes suitable for sometime in the