Influential teacher and top designer left his mark with Nylex products

LIONEL ANDREW SUTTIE
INDUSTRIAL DESIGNER, ARTIST
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By ANDREW SUTTIE and IAN WONG

LIONEL Suttie, an industrial designer whose work included many classic Nylex plastic consumer products found in most Australian homes and businesses, has died of pneumonia at a nursing home in Narre Warren North. He was 80.

Lionel, who played a prominent role in the development of the profession of industrial design in Australia in the 1960s and ’70s, was an alumnus of and taught for many years at RMIT. He also found success as a watercolor artist.

The colours orange and brown were the rage in the 1970s and most Australian kitchens had a set of BX Plastics canisters in orange and brown with faux wood tops — designed by Lionel. Among the other functional and stylish products that he either designed or directed the design of were the classic Nylex swing-top kitchen tidy, Nylex Eskies, radio cabinets, meal trays for the domestic airline TAA, sewing machine cabinets, dinnerware and crates for industry. Many are still in production.

As a lecturer at RMIT from 1956, he taught and influenced a new generation of industrial designers. Among his students were Michael Simcoe, designer of the Holden Monaro and now head of exterior design General Motors in the United States, Mark Armstrong of Blue Sky Design, the designer of the Sydney Olympic torch, and Phil Slattery and Robert Pataki, designers of the Safe-n-Sound baby capsule.

Born in Melbourne to Vera and Leo Suttie, Lionel was educated at Melbourne High and later studied industrial design at RMIT. He began work in 1945 as a junior draftsman at Friar Manufacturing, and in 1948 moved to Moulded Products, later Nylex Corporation. By 1953, he was assistant industrial designer of consumer goods. In 1955, he set up a second design department to concentrate on custom moulded products, and continued as senior industrial designer until 1961, when he directed the amalgamation of the company’s consumer and custom design departments.

Lionel worked for Nylex for about 22 years, finishing as chief designer. In 1970, following a takeover, he transferred to BX Plastics as chief designer, and designed the stylish melamine Bessemer range of tableware that is now widely collected at vintage stores and on eBay.

Lionel was a founding member of the Industrial Design Institute of Australia and federal president in 1973-74. He represented the institute at EXPO 67 in Montreal, and the following year at an international conference for industrial designers in Ottawa.

In retirement, Lionel returned to his other great passion, painting in watercolor, and exhibited often at venues around Melbourne. He won many prizes and commendations, and his paintings have found a home in many private collections in Australia and overseas.

In his younger days he played tennis with enthusiasm and some success, and he remained an avid follower of that sport and a zealous and ever-optimistic supporter of Collingwood Football Club.

He is survived by his former wife, Cecile, and sons Michael, Andrew and Timothy.

Andrew Suttie is Lionel Suttie’s son; Ian Wong is a lecturer in design at RMIT University.