

## “As a designer, I do not concentrate on design”

*Industrial designer Mario Selic has been contributing to the successful design of KUKA robots for many years. At AUTOMATICA in Munich he spoke with KUKA Roboter’s Katrin Stuber about his work with the robot manufacturer. And also about the role of product design in the field of B2B and how the culture of a country can influence design issues.*

**Stuber:** KUKA Roboter received its first design award in 1998. This was followed by awards for the KR 2000 series. How did you approach the design of these robots?

**Selic:** First of all, I considered the expectations placed on an industrial robot: it should be strong, but at the same time fast and agile. Like an athlete. I also felt, however, that it had never really been possible to see this performance and ability in industrial robots just by looking at them. I wanted to change that.

**Stuber:** Was there already a discernible trend, back then, that design would play an important role for industrial robots? How important is the appearance of an industrial product in any case?

**Selic:** Of course design plays a role, even for capital goods. That was already the case then. Automotive manufacturers were the first to install glass factories. When customers walk through a plant, the appearance of the machines is not unimportant. But not only there, in my opinion. For purchasers, also, the design of a product is not the least of the evaluation criteria.

In addition to KUKA Roboter, a large number of other companies in the B2B sector also place importance on design. Heidelberger Druckmaschinen, for example, or Festo. Manufacturers want their products to stand out from the competition with a distinctive corporate image of their own and a high recognition value. An expressive, powerful robot leaves a more positive lasting impression than an unprepossessing, powerless machine.



**Stuber:** But isn't quality the most important factor?

**Selic:** Naturally. But the two are not mutually exclusive. We do not just have design effects with KUKA robots. Nothing is added that does not have a functional role. No panels or housings sticking out to impinge upon the agility of the robot. A KUKA robot should look as though it was molded in one piece. Only then is it fully developed. Incidentally, design does not necessarily mean higher prices. Functional or intelligent design reduces costs, as superfluous parts are omitted.

**Stuber:** What design trends could there be in robotics? Do you think that robot design will still change much? What could influence the design development of the future?

**Selic:** A great many things. Firstly, technical progress opens up new possibilities. New technologies and new constructional elements allow new approaches. Furthermore, it depends on the areas in which industrial robots are to be used. A robot for the service robotics or medical sector must make a different impression than a robot being used in industry. It should be designed in such a way that people are prepared to work closely with it. It needs to inspire more confidence, somehow, and perhaps appear less sporty.

**Stuber:** What does the red dot award mean for you personally?

**Selic:** Alongside the IndustrieForum Hannover, red dot is the most important internationally recognized design award. It therefore naturally means a lot to me when products whose design I have worked on receive this award. International recognition is something very special.

**Stuber:** Why is international recognition so important? Do different countries have different approaches to design?

**Mario Selic:** Yes. Design is always influenced by the local culture. For the Germans, for example, the main priority is for everything to be functional and robust. Italians like things to be more delicate and emotional. The French place emphasis on elegance, while the Spanish like a more playful design. Just take a look at the different criteria involved in buying cars in these countries.

Since KUKA sells robots in all different countries, an internationally comprehensible corporate image is important. Our sporty/elegant design for KUKA robots hits the nail on the head.

**Stuber:** How closely does one have to study technical issues in your work? You studied design.

**Selic:** Industrial design encompasses three areas: marketing, technology and design. The product derives from the intersection of these three areas. Technical understanding is crucial, otherwise I would just end up designing things that leave the engineers shaking their heads.

**Stuber:** Are you at AUTOMATICA today in your capacity as designer?

**Selic:** It goes without saying that I get a lot of ideas and inspiration at trade fairs. I will be taking a look around later with someone from the Development department of your company. It will be interesting to see what we discover...

**Stuber:** Will you also be taking a look at our competitors?

**Mario Selic:** Of course. Absolutely.

**Stuber:** And what will you be looking out for in particular?

**Mario Selic:** I am interested in seeing how an engineer solves specific technical requirements. And I am on the look-out for trends. As a designer, I do not concentrate on design.