

Building Books

The Powerful Book Designs of Irma Boom

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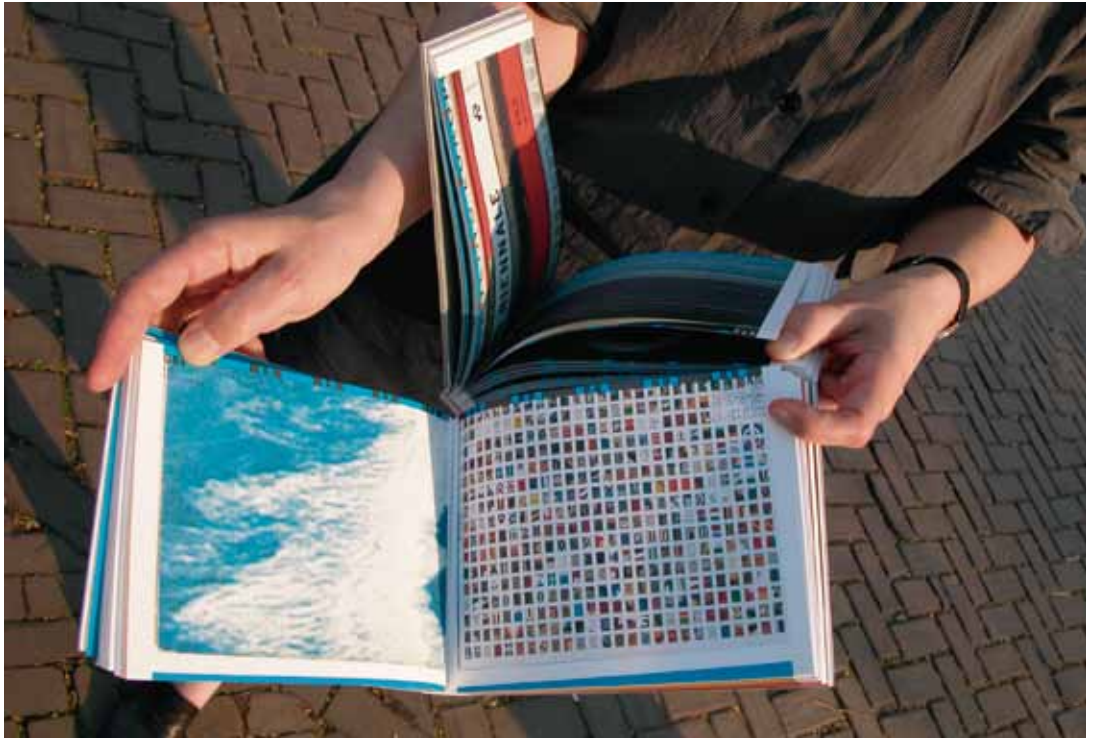
Irma Boom (b. 1960) mainly designs books. That is her speciality. However, she will on occasion also create a company logo or design postage stamps (such as the butterfly stamps for the 1993 *Nature & Environment* series or *550 years of the Court of Audit*). In 2006 she designed the *Australia Fiver* for the Dutch Mint, a five euro coin depicting three globes on each side, each from a different perspective, all caught in a design of gossamer-fine lines which represent the trade routes used by merchant ships sailing to and from Australia.

Her books are to be found in the Pompidou Centre's book collection, in Yale University Library and in the permanent Architecture & Design collection of New York's Museum of Modern Art. They also have a place in the Special Collections of the library of Amsterdam University where her archive is housed.

Irma Boom's book designs are exceptional. Each has its own character, specifically reflecting the contents of that particular book. Sometimes the book's form recreates the context of the subject (such as the postage stamp yearbooks) or the dialectic of a complex history (as in the commemorative 'think-book' for the Coal Trading Association SHV Holdings), sometimes it is an analysis of a whole oeuvre (such as the book about Otto Treumann's work), or it reflects the unity of body and soul (as in the book about the work of the American textile artist Sheila Hicks). In every case there has been an intense dynamic tension between a passionate designer with strong artistic opinions, the patron and their joint project: the content of the book. She has regularly won prizes for her book designs, including, on a number of occasions, the prize for the best-produced book from the CPNB, the organisation of Dutch Publishers and Booksellers. In 2001, in Leipzig, her oeuvre to date was awarded the Gutenberg prize, while at the 2007 Leipzig Book Fair *Weaving as Metaphor* was voted the most beautiful book in the world.

Book Design

Ever since the 15th century, there has been a rich tradition of printing in the Netherlands. The skills of letter-casting, engraving and printing have been carefully nurtured over the centuries. The seventeenth century was a Golden



Age not only of painting but also of book production, producing a wealth of typefaces, page layouts and illustrations. At the end of the nineteenth century people became aware of this and sought to bring about a revival. The guiding light here was the English artist William Morris, leader of the Arts & Crafts movement, with his artisanal books. New ideas developed about the nature of book design. The book should form an integrated whole in the service of the information it contained, an architectonic creation. Those who created such books were community-minded artists such as Anton Derkinderen, R.N. Roland Holst, Jan Toorop and Chris Lebeau. Architects like De Bazel, Berlage and Lauweriks also played their part in educating people with their book designs. Their books were works of art with a wealth of monumental pictures. The cover, the typeface and the illustrations formed a complete unity. In this the book precisely corresponded with the architecture of the time in which exterior and interior were attuned to each other down to the smallest detail.

Designers such as Van Krimpen, Wijdeveld and Schuitema, Van Doesburg, Zwart and Werkman brought the book into the modern era.

Two designers played a major role in Irma Boom's development: Abe Kuipers (b. 1918) and Jurriaan Schrofer (1926-1990). Kuipers, a painter and graphic designer, was a lecturer at the Academy for Art and Industry [Aki] in Enschede

Irma Boom, *Form and pages of Gutenberg Galaxy*, 2002 (Catalogue of her own oeuvre).



Irma Boom, Butterfly Stamp from the series *Nature and Environment*, Koninklijke PTT Nederland, 1993.

and gave her a grounding in typography and the basic principles of the book: structure and readability. Schrofer, who was external examiner for Boom's final examination, taught her the value of independent research and gave her the freedom to follow her own insights in dealing with the framework of typography and the rules governing the relationship between font and text.

The postage stamp yearbooks

After completing her studies in Enschede, Irma Boom worked for some years as a designer in the government's printing and publishing house (SDU). There she met leading typographers and book-designers who provided her with invaluable postgraduate experience. During that period she also got to know the art historian Johan Pijnappel. Boom worked on various projects at the SDU, and also undertook minor tasks such as designing advertisements for the publishing department. These attracted the attention of Ootje Oxenaar, director of the Dutch Postal Service's Aesthetic Design Department. At the end of 1988 he invited her to create the postage stamp yearbooks for 1987 and 1988, with a deadline of just three months. She threw herself into the challenge. Her scientific interests, which would later influence the form of her work more and more clearly, give these books an exceptional impact.

At first the stamp books attracted a good deal of criticism. Only much later did they become successful and win a great many awards. Irma Boom's approach reflected a new perception of the designer's role: that of compiler and author. She opted for a lay-out which placed the stamps in context by including

the sketches, photographs and working drawings which showed the sources of inspiration that had led to their creation. She also exploited the potential of the books themselves as bound printed matter. The pages were, in the Japanese bookbinding style, closed at the front while inside they were printed on both sides, one of which was in colour. There were no hyphens because the text was squared off and justified: her tribute to abstract art. In spite of budgetary constraints and doctrinaire objections from her superiors, she succeeded in pushing through her ideas.

Of their kind the postage stamp yearbooks constituted a revolution. They broke with the philatelic tradition of neatly grouped series with precise descriptions. When the books first appeared she received angry letters from both colleagues and collectors who regarded her work as destructive. But the following year they were exhibited in Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum as some of the best-produced books of that year.

The Patron

Irma Boom has wanted to be part of the editorial team from the start, to enable her to control the integration of form and content. She sees the designing of a book as an interactive game between the development of the content, the connections and creative associations, and the form. She demands that the patron be fully involved in this creative process. When all goes well, the designer can then draw on the patron's command of the material, its context and background, and thus raise the interaction between ideas and images to a higher plane. The relationship she seeks with the patron is that of the designer to the philosopher, in which the philosopher is an artist who manipulates and arranges ideas so that the designer can work on them.

One patron who completely lived up to Irma Boon's ideal was Paul Fentener van Vlissingen (1941-2006), with whom she collaborated from 1990 for more than fifteen years.

The SHV "Think-Book"

In September 1990, a conference on *Art meets Science and Spirituality in a changing Economy* was held in Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum. One of the speakers was Paul Fentener van Vlissingen, the Chief Executive of SHV Holdings who were sponsoring the conference. Irma Boom had designed the book for this conference while still working at the Government printers. It was a beautiful volume, full of information, and restrained in its typography and illustrations but nevertheless very outspoken about the importance of art.

Soon after that, Irma Boom and Fentener van Vlissingen met properly for the first time. The purpose of the meeting was the production of a book to mark his fiftieth birthday containing his own drawings and photographs of Scotland.¹ This publication was the first in a series of sixteen books in all, one of which was published each year on his birthday. Boom's most talked-about work, the commemorative "think-book" of the Coal Trading Association (SHV), also belongs to this series.²



Irma Boom, *SHV Think*
Book, SHV Holdings Utrecht,
English Edition, 1996

In September 1991, Paul Fentener van Vlissingen commissioned Irma Boom and the art historian Johan Pijnappel to produce within five years a commemorative volume celebrating the centenary of the SHV, which had been founded in 1896 by the merger of eight Dutch coal merchants who thought that in this way, rather than by competing against each other, they could demand a higher price for coal from the German Ruhr area. Under the name of the Coal Trading Association this cartel rapidly built up a huge distribution network with its own trains and ships.

Commission, research and vision

Fentener van Vlissingen's commission was for an exceptional book about the extraordinary story of a company that over a period of one hundred years had developed from the original cartel of eight families of coal merchants into a huge international holding company. The old company reports in particular provided a fascinating picture of a world in which the coal routes provided the infrastructural network that underlay the political, social and economic events of the time. For their research, Boom and Pijnappel were given access to all the company's archives both at home and abroad. They constantly discussed their discoveries with their client, who himself found the experience hugely inspirational. The result was no ordinary jubilee publication, very far from being the usual glamorous celebration of the company's successes. It became a multi-layered journey through history, full of associations, in the way that the process of assimilating information can evoke a range of associations.

So as not to lose sight of their guiding principles, Boom and Pijnappel created a series of key concepts that they could regularly fall back on, such as 'Not dogmatic', 'Stamina', 'Optimism', 'Empathy' and 'Hard work'. For the ultimate objective of their five years' work was to create not just a reference book but a book full of colour, pictures, documents, reports, typography and questions about the company's past, a visual document to inspire future shareholders.



Irma Boom, Two pages from SHV 'Think Book', Chinese edition with portraits of Irma Boom and Johan Pijnakker, 1996.

The book was to serve as a tool to be used by the multinational's future managers. The company's philosophy was worked into the pages of the book as a watermark: *Look for the unusual | learn, react, listen | motivate people | keep things simple...*

The Form

The SHV book poses questions. It shows the past in order to evoke the future. The book begins with holes, without any printing. The holes represent the still unknown future; from 2096 until 1996, though, the holes do become smaller. After that comes the history, going back to the founding of the Coal Trading Association in 1896. The book weighed 3.5 kilos and was 2,136 pages thick, printed on paper specially made by Irma Boom herself to last for five centuries, a condition imposed by the patron. The edges of the pages are a vital part of the book because of their colour scheme and because of Gerrit Achterberg's poem *Bohero van Ravel*, which appears on the edges as one leafs through the book. The book has no page numbers and no table of contents, so there is no steering mechanism. The only guidance is provided by the content, which develops in the same way as does the poem. It is an adventure, a journey. You have unexpected encounters and unexpected experiences. It is a 'think-book', in a white cover for the English version and a black one for the Chinese, with eight bookmarks for the eight families. The broad spine of the 11 centimetre thick book shows the logo of the SHV, which is reminiscent of the Utrecht coat of arms, the city where the SHV is based.



Irma Boom, Two pages from
SHV 'Think Book', English
Edition, 1996

Book for a colleague

Patrons like Fentener Van Vlissingen are rare. In 1999–2000 Boom created a book on the work of the well-known designer Otto Treumann (1919–2001) for the series *Graphic Design in the Netherlands*. In this case she had to connect with the work of an older colleague. The book, whose form is compelling despite some technical imperfections in the colour, is a visual journey which begins with a complete overview of Treumann's work through hundreds of tiny images on the cover; within the book the viewer is drawn along to full-size images of a number of works, and can then delight in greatly enlarged detail. With each turn of the page, the selections become more penetrating and increasingly refined. It was Irma Boom who chose the works and decided in what order they should appear. Although Treumann himself had reacted positively to the ideas and the proofs throughout the creative process, he was not happy with the result. The confrontation was too much for him. *'It is your book, not mine'*, he said to Irma to which she replied *'Yes. It is my book about you'*.

Evidently his identification with his own image had become so dominant over the years that it had created too high a mental threshold for him to be able to comprehend the fresh contemporary form in which Irma Boom with her insight and talent had placed his work. She had studied his ideas and his work in great detail and wanted the book to be a homage to him. And in that she succeeded. In the cinematic succession of illustrations and screens, the series of ever-larger pictures, photographs, drawings, letters and objects, she set his work in a new perspective and opened it up to a new young generation. The reaction of graphic designer, Anton Beeke, was that with this exceptional book she had brought Otto Treumann into the twenty-first century.



Irma Boom, Two pages from 'Otto Treumann', *Graphic design in the Netherlands*, 2001

The book as metaphor

At the age of 72 the celebrated American textile artist Sheila Hicks was looking for a designer for her new book. It was to be published by Yale University Press on the occasion of an exhibition of her work at the Bard Graduate Center in New York. The Czech photographer Joseph Koudelka, who had photographed the Prague Revolution of 1968, unearthed Irma Boom for Hicks in the famous Paris bookshop La Hune where he came upon her postage stamp yearbooks. Although he didn't immediately understand the context of the books, he was impressed by their technique and design. He rang Sheila Hicks with the words: 'I don't know who she is, but she's just got to do your book.' Hicks tracked her down and invited her to Paris.

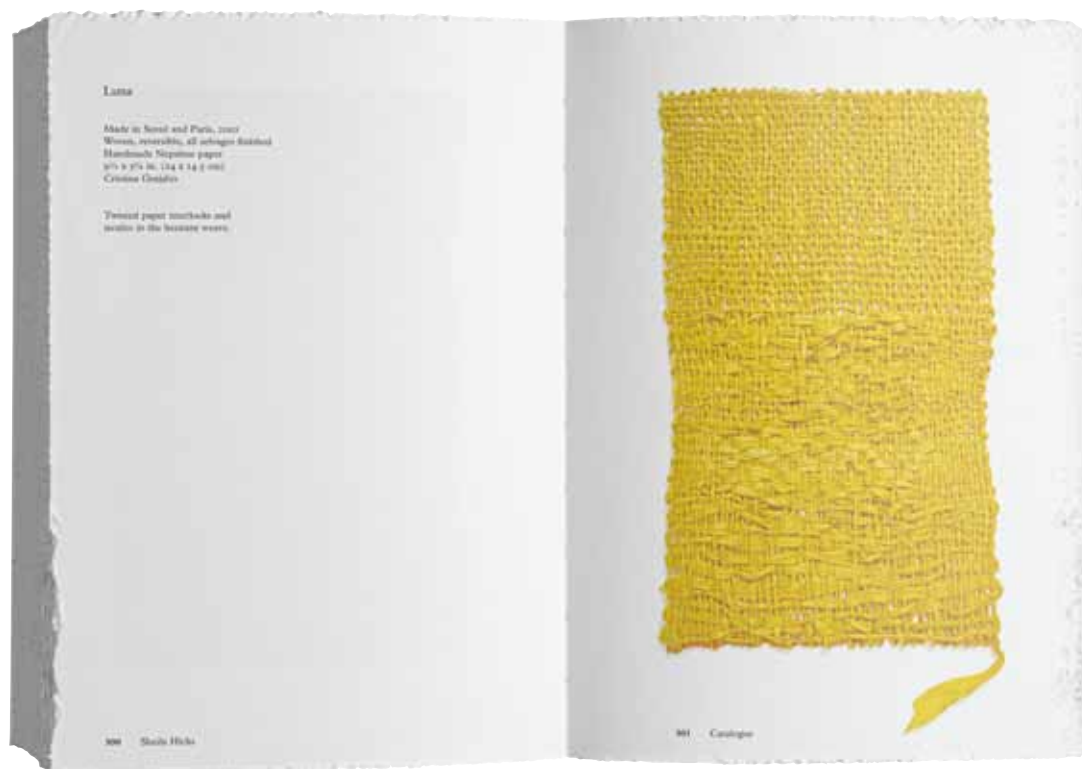
Hicks had originally studied painting at the Yale School of Art but during her studies turned her attention to textiles, in which field she achieved undisputed greatness. The subject of the book would not be her usual independent monumental works but her miniatures - small fabric pieces about 30 cm. high. The book *Weaving as Metaphor* looks like a small bale of cotton. It is composed of matt white paper and the edges are rough. Impressed into the white surface of the cover is a blind stamping of a work by Hicks which further strengthens the metaphor. The book contains more than 100 miniatures and a number of pictures of Hicks and her working environment. These are textile sketches which she jotted down during her many travels. Each right-hand page displays a piece of her work. The left-hand page is white, containing only a brief description of the work. Because of all the surrounding white paper, the illustrations are isolated and so stand out the more strikingly.

By treating her material in this way Boom gave the book a sculptural and extremely tactile quality. The content was enhanced by a number of essays in

Plantin typeface. In the article by the philosopher Arthur Danto, *Weaving as metaphor and model for political thought*, she gradually decreased the font size, thus challenging the reader to continue reading the text.

As usual, once Irma Boom had decided what form the book should take, she would not change her mind. This led to serious problems with the publisher, whose art books generally had a standard format. The Americans had absolutely no confidence in the work of this Dutch designer who argued for an unusual work that was intended to appeal to a wider public than just the devotees of textile art. In the end, though, it was printed and bound as Boom wanted it to be. And it was also a success. Further impressions followed. This extraordinary book, which became a collector's item, formed a very special monument to the work of Sheila Hicks and brought it once more into the public eye.

Irma Boom, Two pages from *Weaving as Metaphor*, 2006.



Education

Since 1992 Irma Boom has been attached to Yale University's School of Art in New Haven in the USA, where for two weeks a year she tutors students for their master's finals. A substantial component of the examination work is theoretical and, true to tradition, this is presented in the form of a book that after the examination is placed in Yale's splendid University Library. The teaching at Yale is intensive and, like every American university, has a strict programme of studies in which theoretical instruction, via the many lectures, seminars and tutorials, provides depth to the course.

As a designer, archives and research are an obsession for Irma Boom and characterise her work. As a student at the Academy in the early 1980s the classes of the cultural historian Joop Hardy made a deep impression on her through his ability to open up the entire history of culture using only a single slide showing nothing but a chair. The exploratory and conceptual character of abstract art has shaped the way she looks at objects. Time and again, works by artists such as Malevich, Mondrian, Martin, Judd and Palermo give her the space she needs in her quest for meaning. ■

Translated by Chris Emery

NOTES

1. 52°5' N 5°8' E 10.30 21031941 N° 835, text, drawings and photographs by Paul Fentener van Vlissingen, concept by Paul Fentener van Vlissingen, Irma Boom, Johan Pijnappel, 1991.
2. Other titles from the series include: Africa Revisited ('Buffelboek'), text and photographs Paul Fentener van Vlissingen, 2001; Mirakele: the making of a South African national park, photographs Louise Agnew, text Paul Fentener van Vlissingen, 2003; The Eleonora first Atlantic Crossing, text Vanessa Mitchell, photographs Paul Fentener van Vlissingen, 2004.