

A Hundred Years of Dutch Design

Overviews of the culture of design are mostly written from an artistic or stylistic perspective, rarely from an economic, sociological or political-philosophical angle. In her book *Dutch Design: A History*, however, Mienke Simon-Thomas has opted for the latter approach; the products and designers are relegated to second place. This means that the focus is first and foremost on information on design education, designers' associations and the role of the state as the instigator of initiatives and provider of subsidies within the system.

The book is built around five topics, which taken together portray the ideological context in which designers worked. The overview begins with 'New Art, Old Craft, 1875-1915', a period in which traditional design confronted increasing industrialisation. The author discusses the development of applied industrial art in the nineteenth century and also examines the role of Victor de Stuers, the first Dutch civil servant with a responsibility for 'art'. A Museum of Applied Industrial Art was established in Haarlem, and in 1871 the first technical school was opened in Amsterdam. There is a detailed study of the phenomenon of 'geometric design', which combined the stylised reproduction of natural forms with geometry. Examples of this style include the work of K.P.C. De Bazel, Lion Cachet and H.P. Berlage. By virtue of his creations for 't Binnenhuis' and his writings Berlage became a central figure in the modernisation of Dutch design. The Netherlands was also represented at the 1900 World Exhibition in Paris. Karel Sluyterman designed a presentation in Art Nouveau style (also called 'Congo style' by people in the Netherlands), that referred to the successful exhibition in Tervuren in 1897.

The second theme, 'Design as Art, 1915-40', examines the concept of design as 'art' and the rapprochement with industry. The example of the 'Deutsche Werkbund', founded in 1907, stimulated co-operative working throughout Europe. For Jan Eisenloeffel it was impossible to combine industry and art. Piet Zwart took the opposing view. For Zwart design was not a question of art or taste, but an expression of the designer's attitude to life. The ideas championed by the Bauhaus de-

termined the new role of the designer. Simon-Thomas also discusses the yearbooks of the Society for Craft and Applied Industrial Art (Vereniging voor Ambachten en Nijverheidskunst or VANK, founded in 1904) published between 1919 and 1932, which give a good idea not only of the products, but also of the debate.

'Good Design, 1925-65', the third topic to be covered, is about the need to improve the world through creating a good design. The author uses the expression '*moralistic modernism*', a style of design that can be defined by three concepts: efficiency, honesty and simplicity. The younger generation of architects in particular, members of De8 (Amsterdam) and Opbouw (Rotterdam), were arguing for a functional architecture in which moral aspects took precedence over those of style. Looking after a modern kitchen was seen as liberating for women. The new applied graphics in advertising, combined with modern typography, were also supposed to contribute to a better world. The work of Piet Zwart, Paul Schuitema and Gerard Kiljan was not only about the products; advertising was also regarded as a new form of art.

Post-war idealism reached its fullest expression in the foundation of the Good Living Foundation (Stichting Goed Wonen) in 1946 and the National Institute for Industrial Design (IIV) in 1950. After the German capitulation the Contracted Artists federation (Gebonden Kunstenaars federatie, GKf) was established by Willem Sandberg and Mart Stam. The concept of 'contracted artist' replaced the old term 'industrial artist' or 'technical artist'. People, not things, were central to the concept of Good Living. There was pressure to contribute to a better style of living in general, in which attractive and well-designed products could play their part. Products that were functional, reliable and affordable qualified for a '*Good Living hallmark*'.

In addition to the designers the book also looks at the role of firms such as Philips, Mosa, the glass manufacturer Leerdam, Ahrend, 't Spectrum etc. The importance of 'taste education' through retail outlets is discussed at length. The 1953 *Our House-Our Home* (Ons Huis-Ons Thuis) exhibition in the Bijenkorf in Amsterdam was organised by Aldo van Eyck, Martin Visser and Benno Premsele. Even greater was the impact of Metz & Co, who played a pioneering role: the



Lingerie by
Marlies Dekkers
(from a survey
exhibition at
Rotterdam Kunsthall,
2008).

majority of foreign design creations were first shown in the Netherlands by Metz.

Chapter 4, 'Design as Profession, 1945-80', examines the shift towards mass production and how designers and companies reacted to this. Industrial activity in the Netherlands doubled between 1948 and 1962. Firms took on professionally-trained industrial designers rather than draughtsmen because design was becoming an important element in the development of a product. In 1953 a group of designers was given a government subsidy to travel around America and acquaint themselves with recent developments in industrial design, with immediate consequences for design education in the Netherlands.

Manufacturers such as Tomado, which had captured the Dutch interior with its metal bookshelf, and Pastou are cited as examples of this period. Vision comes from the individual, as in the case of the designer Kho Liang le who in 1959 advised the firm of Artifor to work with the Frenchman Pierre Paulin. This collaboration earned the firm a European name it retains to this day. More and more emphasis was placed on the importance of graphic design, on logos and other graphic products. Bureaus such as Tel Design, Total Design, Design Studio Premsele Vonk and Studio Dumbar became the trendsetters. Total design projects like the new airport at Schiphol became calling cards for the Netherlands. And with progressive designs for banknotes and postage stamps the government too contributed to the Netherlands' image as a land of designers.

The concluding chapter, 'Design for Debate, 1970s to the Present', begins with Gijs Bakker's umbrella lamp (1983). The boundaries between art, fashion and design are beginning to blur. The dogma of the strictly functional is losing ground, a product also has to make a statement. For the 1970s Simon-Thomas cites Simon Mari

Pruys' fundamental contribution to the design debate: his *Things Shape People* (Dingen vormen mensen), published in 1972, is 'the first socio-cultural inventory of the theme of design education in the Netherlands'. Government begins to put the emphasis on the debate, not so much on the creation of products.

There has been a massive upsurge in public interest in design, design takes over everything. In 1978 Ikea entered the Dutch market and Hema launched the phrase 'good, cheap and well designed'. The author goes at length into the debate in the graphic sector, discussing figures like Crowel, Van Toorn, Beeke, Brattinga and others. The 1980s saw the emergence of a new phenomenon: designers who also manufactured their own designs. Following the founding of Droog Design (Dry Design) by Renny Ramkers and Gijs Bakker in 1994, the international media hailed the Netherlands as 'the' country for design. This set-up gave figures like Bey, Hutten, Wanders and Jongerius a chance to make a name for themselves. Droog Design creations found a home in the restaurant of MoMa in New York, an initiative subsidised by the government as 'propaganda for avant-garde Dutch design'.

But Droog Design does not stand alone. Think for instance of Marlies Dekkers' lingerie, Viktor & Rolf's fashion, and the typefaces of Gerard Unger.

The success of Dutch design is the fruit from a reorientation in design education. The starting point is 'conceptual design', in which the Design Academy in Eindhoven is the pioneering institution. In addition the government is providing a considerable subsidy for design, to be distributed through various channels. And 2002 saw the establishment of Premsele, a new design institute for design and fashion.

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Translated by Sheila M. Dale

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