

## More an Inventor than a Designer

### Iris van Herpen's Needle, Thread and Three-Dimensional Techniques

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[ B R E G J E L A M P E ]

At the age of thirty, Iris van Herpen (born 1984, in Wamel) is already a fixture on the forefront of the international fashion and art world. Mid 2014 she won the Andam Award, a prestigious international fashion prize worth 250,000 euro and a year's coaching from François-Henri Pinault, the big boss of fashion group Kering (formerly PPR, the main competitor of LVMH). By then Van Herpen had already received three Dutch Fashion Awards and two Dutch Design Awards.

For Van Herpen the Andam Award is the umpteenth proof that her talent is being recognized internationally. The Dutch designer was up against a host of international designers like Yiqing Yin, Jean-Paul Lespagnard, Steven Tai and Fausto Pugli. The jury consisted of big international names like photographer Ellen von Unwerth, Angela Chung, the editor-in-chief of the Chinese Vogue, Sarah Andelman, the creative director of Colette, and some of the most important people at Kering.

Previously the prize had been awarded to Victor & Rolf, Martin Margiela and Giles Deacon – who all went on to establish well-known labels. And it looks very much like Van Herpen is set to become another famous brand name too. She is in fact already well on her way. She can count women like Daphne Guinness, Björk and Lady Gaga among her customers. Last year the New York City Ballet asked her to make costumes. At the end of 2013, Dover Street Market in London began selling her clothes.

Her solo exhibition, shown in Groningen two years ago, is now travelling the world. The influential and well-known fashion designer Karl Lagerfeld is a fan and regularly lets her know that he follows and appreciates her work. And influential fashion journalists like Suzy Menkes always attend her shows in Paris.

### Umbrella spokes

Iris van Herpen had always wanted to 'do something with clothes'. Or dance. When she was about fourteen – 'at the time, you know, when you are starting to be preoccupied with what you are wearing' – she decided to study fashion design. In 2006 she graduated from the most respected art school in the Netherlands: the ArtEZ Institute in Arnhem, with a major in fashion design. During



her studies she interned with the world-famous Alexander McQueen in London and with Claudy Jongstra in Friesland, a Dutch designer who is especially well-known for the fact that she works a lot with natural materials like felt and wool.

While many designers choose a spot abroad after their studies, to gain more experience in the fashion world, Van Herpen was always determined to set up business for herself. Within a year of graduation she came out with her first collection at the Amsterdam Fashion Week, the most important platform for new Dutch talent. She immediately stood out: her complicated, avant-garde creations, with sometimes absurdly large shoulder pads, were *the* subject of conversation during the cocktail hour after the show. From then on she was a force to be reckoned with in the Netherlands. For her first few collections she used hardly any fabric. For her debut collection, *Chemical Crows*, in January 2008, inspired by a group of crows flying around her studio in Arnhem, she took apart more than four hundred children's umbrellas and used the metal spokes in her dresses and shoulder pads. For the same collection she designed close-fitting dresses made from thick braids of thread and leather, and leather strips combined with metal rings.

Her first show stood out because it was different. It wasn't a commercial collection inspired by daily wear, nor were there absurdly elegant or luxurious dresses. There was no colour; everything was grey, black or cream-coloured. The feminine, tight shapes, the preference for dark colours, the use of unusual materials, were all there already, at her first show. That Van Herpen had her own style right from the beginning of her career is extraordinary, for the designer was only 23 at that first presentation.

But at the end of it there was a pale, shy, frail girl hovering in the background. She moved graciously, thanks to her many years of ballet training – her mother was a ballet teacher. But she hardly dared to open her mouth to the press, while much of her face was hidden behind tangled red hair. As if she had no right to be there. That girl, who grew up in a small town in Gelderland, has grown into a woman. Now, when she receives the press at the end of a show, or in between shows at her studio, we see a self-assured lady. Her hair is pulled back, her back is straight. She looks you in the face and is not afraid to talk.



### Letting go of gravity

In the eight years after her graduation Van Herpen has grown a lot: as a human being and as a designer. Nowadays she is headquartered in a spacious studio with lots of light in the Veem building, directly on the IJ in Amsterdam. Her style is still as recognizable as before. But the umbrella spokes and other unusual materials have been replaced by special high-tech materials. She is continuously researching new techniques and possibilities. And she is at the forefront in the use of 3D printers, a much-discussed technique that has nearly become synonymous with her name.

In 2013 she was invited to be the guest editor of *A-Magazine*, a magazine that portrays the world around a designer. With this she followed in the footsteps of hat designer Stephen Jones, Givenchy's Riccardo Tisci and designers Yohji Yamamoto and Haider Ackermann. Van Herpen made a bizarre but beautiful cover in collaboration with model Hanne Gay Odiele and photographer Pierre Debusschere. The job of guest editor was a perfect opportunity for the designer to explain her work. A show only lasts fifteen minutes at the most and the commentary afterwards is often summarized in four or five sentences. In the magazine there is an interview with choreographer Benjamin Millepied, with whom she has designed ballet costumes and an essay by Harold Koda, the costume curator of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, about the Charles James exhibition.

Van Herpen's work isn't easy to explain. She is not the kind of designer who finds inspiration in everyday life, or for whom comfort is the most important criterion. She doesn't fantasize about princess dresses with wide skirts reaching to the ground. No, when Van Herpen fantasizes it's about something as abstract as letting go of gravity and how it would look if models could float through space. Or about all the things that would be possible if she could combine 3D printing with 3D scanning.



### A 3D-printed dress

Van Herpen collaborates with a small group of scientists, biologists and architects from around the world. Among them Neri Oxman of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Rachel Armstrong of AVATAR (Advanced Virtual and Technological Architectural Research) of the University of Greenwich in London and architect Philip Beeseley, who often collaborates with CERN, the European Institute for Nuclear Research. Together with them Van Herpen works on long-term projects like materials for which no worm or cotton plant would be required and which don't yet have a name.

She finds it important to be continually researching and to look further ahead than just the next show. That's why she immerses herself in the newest technological developments, related to flying, invisibility and growing architecture. With this she has clearly found a niche. That's a clever move, for as a young fashion designer you do need a niche if you want to be a player in the international fashion world. The public at large needs to know what you stand for as a designer.

In 2009 she left the Amsterdam Fashion Week behind and went abroad. She began in London with shows during the London Fashion Week. This is the fashion week where many young designers with international ambitions start out. She debuted there in July 2009 with the collection *Radiation Invasion*, where with dresses layered with folds she showed the invisible electromagnetic radiation that surrounds us. The second collection she showed in London was called *Synesthesia* and dealt with the sensitivity of the body. She depicted this with clothes made from gossamer-fine fringes; the singer Bjork wears a piece from this collection on the cover of her album *Biophilia*.

In 2011 a 3D-printed dress she designed for the collection *Escapism*, about the emptiness of digital addiction, was named one of the fifty best inventions of the year by TIME magazine. That dress and the rest of the collection were the reason that the prominent French Fédération de la Haute Couture invited her to become a member. For Van Herpen acknowledgement by the most prestigious

institute in the fashion world was the international breakthrough of which so many beginning designers dream.

Since 2011 she has been showing during Couture Week in the fashion mecca Paris. London was good for her name and a first foray into the international fashion world, but in the end every designer wants to go to Paris. This is of course also true for Van Herpen. For Paris is still the place to be.

### **There are enough clothes in the world**

In 2011 she showed the collection *Capriole* during Paris Couture Week, evoking the feeling one has just before and during a parachute jump. And it was during Paris Haute Couture Week that she showed one of the most extraordinary collections, *Voltage*, for here, for the first time, she used flexible material from a 3D printer. For this collection, in which she examined the body's own electricity, she won the Dutch Design Award in 2013. Before that, material from a 3D printer was often hard and stiff, which made her clothing look like objects. Not for nothing were they so often exhibited in museums. But thanks to the Belgian company Materialise, where she had had her designs printed from the very beginning, she finally had the use of supple material from the printer.

Van Herpen had waited years for this moment. She had shown a whole congress hall full of 3D-print company directors the potential of flexible materials and what applications would be possible in fashion. For that is another side of Van Herpen, she is also an inspired speaker, who can make others believe in her dreams.

In the next collection, *Wilderness Embodied*, about wild nature, shown in 2013 during the Haute Couture Week in Paris, she continued with the use of flexible material from the 3D printer. She made impressive dresses and suits that surround the body and developed matching shoes in collaboration with United Nude, the shoe label of Rem D. Koolhaas.

Van Herpen has said for years that couture is enough for her; that she isn't all that eager to take the usual paths in the fashion world; that she doesn't want to just hurl more clothes into the world. And yet, in October 2013, she showed at the Ready-to-Wear Fashion Week in Paris for the first time. But that she now participates in the commercial variation of the Couture Week doesn't mean she is turning into a brand that just makes T-shirts for retail outlets. On the contrary, it is not her intention to dress as many people as possible. There are already enough clothes in the world, she finds. She wants to think up new materials and surprise the old fashion world with her ideas.

### **Clothes with a beat**

That the press, in spite of the overly full program of the Ready-to-Wear Week, pays attention to her work became apparent at her debut there, in October 2013. At the first show of a relatively unknown designer who isn't part of a great empire like LVMH or Kering, no more than a handful of interested people usually attend. They are there because they have known the designer for some time, or are from the same country or because they are friends.





But influential fashion journalists like Suzy Menkes and Vanessa Friedman came to the Ready-to-Wear debut of Van Herpen. The well-known actress Tilda Swinton was also in the front row at *Silencio*, David Lynch's exclusive night club where the collection was being shown. On the runway was top model Saskia de Brauw, among others, who has also worked for big labels like Givenchy and Saint Laurent. That such big names were present at Van Herpen's show means that her talent is recognized internationally.

At her debut in Paris she immediately took advantage of the opportunity to introduce a new technique: clothes with a beat. *Embossed Sounds* is the name of the collection, which consists of close-fitting tops with Plexiglas bead work and short dresses with embossed tribal-like motifs of high-tech materials in which sensors have been incorporated that cause the clothes to produce sound when they are touched.

Her second presentation during Ready-to-Wear Week, called *Bioparicay*, was just as much a bravura act. The decor especially, created in collaboration with the artist Lawrence Malstaf, was unsettling: in the middle of the runway, three models were suspended in huge plastic bags that were slowly being vacuum-sucked during the show. Think of Van Herpen's dream of models free from the pull of gravity, floating through space. The decorations on the clothes were made from synthetic glass and the showpiece was a short dress consisting of loose and flexible parts from a 3D printer, coated with silicone.

The question is how suitable these pieces of her ready-to-wear collections are for retail outlets. For not everything Van Herpen invents is easy to produce. Let alone to wear. But indeed, she does not have to dress the whole world. 'And those who want to wear my clothes must be able to afford them', she says. At the moment her clothes are being sold through eight international shops, among them the famous Dover Street Market in London. The plan is that her unique couture collections and long-term research will continue to be the basis of her work, and that the ready-to-wear that is derived from that will be suitable for retail outlets. Van Herpen is only at the beginning of this process, but she has proven that there is room for her singular approach. ■

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