

## Magic and the Creation of Illusion

### The Design Work of Marcel Wanders

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[ F R E D E R I K E H U Y G E N ]

The work of Dutch celebrity designer Marcel Wanders (born 1963) raises many questions. Is he a superb stylist or is his styling superficial? Is he an artistic designer or a commercial entrepreneur? His exuberance sets us thinking about taste, kitsch and quality. What does celebrity really mean in design? The designer as omnipotent God, a super-brand in which personality and product are seamlessly united? Or is Wanders about entertainment and experience, a melting pot of high and low culture?

In the 1980s Marcel Wanders was a designer seeking his own path through the predominant postmodernism of the day. At the academy in Arnhem he stood out for his talent, commercial and presentational sensitivity, and eagerness to learn. 'In principle I want everything, and I want it all to be very good.'<sup>1</sup> His ambitions were boundless. His breakthrough came in 1996 with the Knotted Chair, a design which reached the press worldwide via Milan. An icon was born and Wanders's career flourished. With customers all over the world and enormous production figures, he became a second Philippe Starck.

Wanders designed all kinds of things: lamps, furniture, vases, pots and pans, cutlery, bathroom fittings, jewellery, office articles, makeup, glasses, clocks, wallpaper, bags, perfume, tiles, towels, electric appliances and tattoos. He clearly enjoys celebrity status and success, but it is less clear how this success should be explained, as making a name and having talent are interchangeable in the world of design, marketing and media.

An all-rounder may be suspected of lack of selectiveness. Does he always perform at a high level? How does he ensure balance between commercial and cultural reputation? Is he after big money and fame? Since Raymond Loewy such designers have stood for style. They cover everything in their own sauce, devaluing their work because they are performing a superficial trick. In the world of high culture, moreover, people look askance at commercially successful artists, questioning their integrity. Do they sacrifice cultural quality and artistic autonomy for commercial value?<sup>2</sup>



Charles Chair, 2015

Knotted Chair, 1996

### Love, passion and dreams

Wanders has designed a great deal but he does not work for everyone. His customers are renowned Italian design companies such as Cappellini, Flos, Magis and Kartell, which advance the culture of design and experimentation. He also works with Alessi, Rosenthal, Tichelaar, Baccarat, Christofle and Swarovski, companies from the top segment of the market, which use the name Wanders as a brand within a brand and as a marketing tool, developing designer lines alongside their own ranges. Often these Wanders lines are less interesting because the work is less innovative. For instance, Wanders designs tableware and gifts, simple basics with his signature, for British department store Marks and Spencer.

Most of Wanders's designs, however, enter the market under his own labels, Moooi and Personal Editions. Moooi, founded in 2001, also produces work by other designers. Personal Editions came along six years later for small series and special, unique items. The Moooi furniture varies. Besides ordinary sofas, armchairs and cabinets, this collection offers crazy little tables and lamps, ceramics and home accessories. So Wanders covers the entire spectrum from expensive to cheap and from unique items to mass production. The luxury seg-

ment dominates, along with interior products. He is a designer of lifestyle and aspirations. Just as magazines are made for their feel-good factor, Wanders's products appeal to the need for glamour, to possess something special. His motto is 'here to create an environment of love, live with passion and make our most exciting dreams come true'.

Nevertheless he also designs technically and formally innovative products which break with tradition, creating vase moulds by stuffing eggs into a condom (Egg Vase, 1997), for example, and 3D-printing snot (Snotty Vase, 2001). The fibre treatment techniques of his famous Knotted Chair reappear in objects of crocheted cotton fixed with epoxy resin. He has also tried out blow-moulding techniques, for instance using balloons of woven carbon fibre as parts of chairs, making chair legs resembling PET bottles and blowing air into a sandwich layer to form a bag.

Snotty Vase, 2001



Wanders clearly takes pleasure in juggling shapes and decorations: table legs become candelabras or candles, church bells become lamps, and sponges vases. Flower motifs, leaf motifs, Delft blue and curls recur throughout his work, printed, machined, painted or in relief. Walls, floors, ceilings, doors and cabinets, everything is covered and manipulated with an obsessiveness indicating that horror vacui is close on his heels. Wanders's interiors are crowded yet eclectic, perfectly embodying postmodernism, citing everything past and present, mixing and intermingling.

## Postmodern?

Nevertheless the label postmodern does not please Wanders. The term reveals the ache of a cynical look at the world. He wants to get past that, and perhaps no aesthetic category exists for his over-the-top interiors. Wanders' swork leaves behind the difference between beautiful and ugly along with any notion of balance or proportion. The word kitsch would be more fitting: imitation, acting expensive, fake and dishonest.<sup>3</sup>

At Wanders's Stedelijk Museum exhibition in Amsterdam in 2014 he put together a room of wonders, a dark environment full of gigantic props, strange furniture and pieces of scenery, with overgrown lampshades, church bells, a cradle and computer photomontage indicating science fiction and gaming. A king-size image of two female faces was made for a luxury apartment building in Istanbul, Turkey. Is it surprising that Wanders has more and more customers in the Middle East? Is his work a perfect fit for the taste of places such as Manama (Bahrein), Qatar and Miami?

Drama, lavish entertaining, revelling in exaggeration, creating fairy tales: Wanders really goes to town when it comes to hotels and shop interiors, and he does so shamelessly and boundlessly, so his work embodies ostentatious consumption and flamboyant play. Sociologist Thorsten Veblen analysed all this in 1899 in his classic book *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. In the better Dutch circles this is taboo, tasteless and ordinary. The wondrous world of Wanders is one of bling, champagne, glamour and money. His work is over-the-top, gilded and decorated, intended to amaze. It is the world of the nouveau riches, the wannabes and wannahaves.

Wanders himself speaks of magic and the creation of illusion. There is a surrealism to it all, a fantasy to fit the digital age. This is escapism, which suits the crisis and other unpleasant world problems. It is enjoyment. Above all, such interiors breathe a strikingly artificial quality, but Wanders challenges us to consider whether ugliness cannot be interesting in itself.

## Recalcitrant?

Time and again Wanders takes a stand against modernism, although strict, austere design and the associated moralising ideology are things of the distant past. In the Stedelijk Museum catalogue, the most recent and serious publication on his work, the authors contrast temptation, sensuality, luxury and excess with modernism.<sup>4</sup> But doesn't that lead to difficulty placing Wanders?



*Marcel Wanders: Pinned Up,*  
Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam 2014

Wanders rejects modernism because he considers it rational and cold, claiming that it has burdened us with products man cannot connect with. He stands up for dreams, emotions, meaning, narrative, value, humanity, sustainability, love, beauty and poetry. I believe that Wanders takes all this seriously, but his 'war on design' sounds like ageing recalcitrance and hollow rhetoric.

### **Value, meaning and luxury goods**

Wanders appeals to feeling and emotion, but who or what determines the connection between people and objects? He holds an intriguing conviction that this connection (outside of theatre and fairy tales) is determined by collective memories and familiar archetypal objects, reminiscences of the past living on inside us. In reality it is difficult to predict what an object will mean to a person. The affective value is different from usefulness (utilitarian value). It falls under what researchers call symbolic value.<sup>5</sup> An object can be strongly connected with the memories of another, a deceased family member for instance, but the item can also have personal significance for an individual or their sense of identity, standing for an achievement or sense of self-esteem. Status and

prestige also fall under symbolic significance, but are oriented more towards the outside world. Symbolic value is certainly relevant to design objects, which Judy Attfield once beautifully characterised in her study *Wild Things* (2000) as 'things with attitude'. Arrogant things, conceited things, things with pretensions, although Wanders would call them things with personality.

On his website Wanders states that he aims to create value, to touch and connect people. He writes that his audiences wish to get more out of life and that he understands 'their need for surprise, for security, for contribution and growth, for individuality and familiarity'. They want illusion and hope. Here the designer sounds like a guru or life fulfilment coach (Wanders himself regularly attends seminars of this kind). At the same time it sounds unmistakably like marketing lingo. In order to understand Wanders and his work we must examine the literature on marketing and brands in relation to luxury goods, as the answers are all in there.

The market is hot, as it is continually growing. Trend watchers, economists and other experts cherish high expectations of China, India, Asia, the Middle East, Latin America and Russia in particular.<sup>6</sup> Luxury goods are high quality and expensive, but they are not essential products. They are characterised by rarity, exclusivity, prestige and authenticity, scoring high on the value scale. For the luxury brand the concept of value is crucial, as in order for people to be willing to hand over large sums of money for a product they have to get something in return. Here again researchers into symbolic value distinguish between outwardly oriented significance, associated with social identity, and inwardly oriented, personal significance. On the one hand status and prestige, conformity and the need to impress others, on the other hand the relationship



Mondrian South Beach Hotel Miami, 2008



with personal identity. Researchers studying the luxury market, however, have added two new value categories: experience related to hedonism and experience of interaction with the brand. In doing so they connect a whole range of issues: aesthetics, sensory experience, craftsmanship, uniqueness, authenticity, spoiling oneself and nostalgia.

Research thus confirms the idealistic statement of principle on Wanders's site: the experience must 'have personal relevance for the customer, be novel, offer an element of surprise, engender learning and engage the customer'.<sup>7</sup> Another noteworthy point of the study is that buyers are keen on authenticity, uniqueness and scarcity. Many people require a guarantee in the form of a certificate, signature or limited edition. And finally, interaction-contact between brand and client - has become enormously important in recent years. This can be done online, but generally it happens through events and parties where socially competitive consumers come into contact with people who are trendy or famous, with media figures and creative types. Value creation takes place via networks in which the worlds of art and commerce (including technology and innovation) are increasingly mixed, as in museums, for example.



Corona de Agua (Water Droplet Tiara), 2001.  
Crown for then princess, now queen Máxima,  
made of polished silver.

Wanders is positioned at the thick of it as a designer, cultural figurehead, brand representative and businessman, but he appears not to be entirely aware of his identity as a brand. That brand stands at the centre of the overlapping fields of influence of culture, commerce, media and entertainment, forming a classic example of their complete fusion. We all live in the era of branding, museums included. There is still enormous space for Wanders's luxury brand to grow in many countries, and as a designer he will undoubtedly go a long way yet. As a creative entrepreneur Wanders also seeks to encourage new talent. Wanders wants it all, and he wants it all to be good. As a representative of the creative industry he is a roaring success. That has won him admiration in the Netherlands. He succeeds in operating commercially and without subsidies. Nevertheless, keeping all those balls in the air must be an art in itself. ■

[www.marcelwanders.com](http://www.marcelwanders.com)

Translated by Anna Asbury

#### NOTES

- 1 NOUDI SPÖNHOF, 'Marcel Wanders, een veelbelovende jonge ontwerper' ('Marcel Wanders, a promising young designer'), in *Items* 7, 1988, p. 21.
- 2 PIERRE BOURDIEU, *Les Règles de l'art: genèse et structure du champ littéraire (The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field)*, éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1992.
- 3 See an article by NIEK HILKMANN:  
<http://www.designhistory.nl/2011/het-begrip-kitsch-in-goed-wonen/>
- 4 *Marcel Wanders: Pinned Up*, in the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 1 February to 15 June 2014.
- 5 <http://www.designhistory.nl/2012/theories-on-people-and-things-2/#fnref-2457-25>
- 6 For this article I used the publication 'Co-creating Value for Luxury Brands' by CAROLINE TYNAN; SALLIE MCKECHNIE and CELINE CHHUON in the *Journal of Business Research*, no. 63, 2010, pp. 1156-1163. The article contains further references to literature on this subject.
- 7 Op. cit., p. 1158, note 8.