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Palette in the Sky

By **ALICE RAWSTHORN**

BERLIN — Like any successful designer whose clients are in different countries, Hella Jongerius spends a lot of time on aircraft, and whenever she has flown anywhere recently, she has taken swatches of fabric to scrutinize after takeoff.

She was anxious to see what they looked like once the aircraft had risen above the clouds. Specifically, Ms. Jongerius wanted to gauge how the changing quality of light at high altitudes would affect her perception of their colors, and to decide which variations of the original hues would achieve the desired effect up in the air. Having made her choices, she then had to convince a bunch of understandably skeptical airline executives why a color, which might not appear particularly appealing on terra firma, would seem much more so once it was airborne.

The result of her research is the elegant palette of carefully chosen shades of blue, brown, gray, aubergine and white in the business-class cabins she has designed for KLM, the airline of the Netherlands, where she is from. Ms. Jongerius's design scheme, which is to be unveiled Tuesday in an aircraft hanger near Amsterdam, will be introduced to KLM's long haul Boeing 747-400 jets this summer.

Nationality apart, Ms. Jongerius, 49, was an unusual choice for KLM. One of the most influential product designers of her generation, she is renowned for conceptual rigor and a subtle, visceral approach, which emphasizes the sensory qualities of color, texture and artisanal detailing. Ms. Jongerius's success in imbuing mass-manufactured products, including furniture for Vitra of Switzerland and textiles for the U.S. group Maharam, with the emotional expressiveness and idiosyncrasies that are usually associated with handcraftsmanship is not something that the strictly regulated, capital intensive aerospace industry has aspired to.

Traditionally, aerospace design has been dominated by large commercial design consultancies that specialize in the field and are noted for their engineering expertise. Redesigning an aircraft cabin is so expensive and requires navigating so many technical and logistical constraints, given the Draconian safety regulations and the need to justify every smidgeon of space and weight, that it is easy to see why airlines have been cautious in making design decisions, and why so many aircraft interiors have ended up looking less the same.

KLM first approached Ms. Jongerius to design the textiles for its long haul but



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including upholstery, curtains, carpets and blankets. After starting work on them, she heard that the airline was ordering new seat-beds and persuaded it to allow her to customize them too.

Working from her Berlin studio with two designers, Edith van Berkel and Arian Brekfeld, who collaborated with her on the textiles and seat-bed respectively, Ms. Jongerius sought to design an environment that would feel less impersonal and more comfortable than conventional ones. "For years, aircraft cabins have been designed as if they were offices with no richness and no energy," she said. "I wanted this one to have more of a poetic feeling, and to seem more like a home or hotel."

Combing through KLM's archives, she found a drawing of a cabin scheme in bold primary colors proposed in the 1950s by Gerrit Thomas Rietveld, one of the Netherlands' most famous 20th-century designers. "Of course it wasn't accepted — too radical," she said. "But it was very nice to see a designer working on a corporate project, yet remaining true to their own vision."

Ms. Jongerius did not have carte blanche to design the cabin. The ceiling, walls and luggage bins were standard components supplied by Boeing, and all she could do with the seat-bed was to simplify its existing design and upgrade the materials. Similarly, she replaced as much of the plastic in the cabin as possible with leather, aluminum and other materials, which would look and feel more engaging.

Color plays a central role in Ms. Jongerius's work, and she is particularly skillful at combining different hues to create specific effects. Having chosen the vibrant blue, which has been KLM's corporate color for decades, as the base of her palette, she picked other hues to complement it, though only after submitting them to impromptu high-altitude tests.

She then designed five different versions of the upholstery fabric, which collectively create the illusion of width within the cabin, while subtly suggesting that each passenger has his or her "own" seat. The presumption of individuality is reinforced by Ms. Jongerius's decision to add different-colored embroideries to each fabric design, and to embroider KLM's white crown symbol on the headrest — "like a throne," as she put it — but without the letters K, L and M.

The yarns in the upholstery fabrics were specially spun and woven, as were those of the double-sided curtains dividing the cabins, displaying dots in business class cabin and stripes in economy. Ms. Jongerius and her team worked closely with the Dutch bedding company Auping to develop blankets and cushions in wools and cottons, which would be robust enough to withstand being washed and dried after every flight. The pillow doubles as a cushion, with crisp white cotton on one side and a geometric pattern similar to that of

the curtains on the other. The blankets feature colored stitching, which evokes artisanal associations to the embroidery.

The carpet was developed with another Dutch manufacturer, Desso, in a complementary pattern and palette to the upholstery. The blue yarns are made from recycled KLM staff uniforms, and the other yarns from a type of wool, which is usually treated as waste. When these carpets wear out, the yarns will be recycled to make new ones.

The effect is as warm, intimate and un-office-y as Ms. Jongerius had hoped. Now that her work on the 747-700s business-class cabin is completed, she is to design the interiors of KLM's other long-haul aircraft, and the economy cabins throughout its fleet. "I understand so much more about the industry and what it needs now," Ms. Jongerius said. "It's as though I've done a masterclass in aerospace design."