

Sewing a new life

Hella Jongerius on an eye-opening encounter in rural India

Dutch designer Hella Jongerius launched her own company, Jongeriuslab, in 1993 after graduating from Design Academy Eindhoven. Focusing on the intersection of craft and technology, she has created products for Maharam, Royal Tichelaar Makkum, Vitra and Ikea and seen her work featured at London's Design Museum and the Smithsonian Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum and Museum of Modern Art in New York. Her latest collection for Ikea, launched this month in partnership with Unicef (The United Nations Children's Fund), is a series of textile wall hangings hand-embroidered by women in rural India.

How did you become involved with the Unicef/Ikea project?

In 2005 I designed a range of ceramic pots for Ikea and a year later someone called to ask if I would be interested in designing a sofa. I wasn't very enthusiastic but I had seen some patterned pillow covers in their offices which was the first Ikea/Unicef product. Anyway, it triggered an idea I had been thinking about for a while and I suggested designing something myself in collaboration with Unicef.

Where did this project take place?

It was in India, in a rural area about an hour from Varanasi. The women ranged in age from 16 to 45 and all had arranged marriages. Even the youngest women had children. One girl, 16, had four. They lived in small, insular communities in the area but didn't know each other.

None of them spoke English apart from one woman, Neetah, who had lived in Mumbai and was married to a local man. She was their leader. They had no skills at all. Edith, who works in my studio in Rotterdam, and Sofia, from Ikea, went there and spent a week training 12 women, who seemed to have the strongest personalities, to be teachers. They taught them how to embroider, which was new to them. These 12 women were going to teach an overall group of 200 women.

How was it possible to teach them totally new skills in a week? Was the work they produced of a satisfactory standard after such a short time?

After Edith and Sofia left, the women practised what they had been taught and sent us samples of the stitch work. It took about six months to assess their skills, which varied a lot, as did the pace at which they were able to produce the work. Some were speedy and others very slow. We finally realised the complexity of the project but by that time we were totally committed. Ikea had a project

manager overseeing things who made several visits to India but she soon discovered that in the villages where the women lived there was no electricity or running water. The conditions were pretty awful and they sat on mud floors to do their work. As a result the samples were very dirty and Ikea took the decision that it was necessary to build a workshop where they could all be together in better, cleaner conditions and properly supervised. The workshop was in a field and a simple construction but it was a good solution for many reasons.

Did you visit them to see things were progressing?

Yes, I went last winter when the workshop opened.

Had you finalised your designs and decided on the product by then?

I had decided to create some textile wall hangings – three different masks depicting characters from Scandinavian fairy tales. Ikea is a Swedish company

and the folk tales are known all over the world through the stories of the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Anderson. That gave it an identifiable global identity. I also liked the notion that animals have the power to be familiar and their moods are comparable to the moods of humans yet at the same time they remain puzzling. This appealed to me too.

I created Pelle the goat, Gullispira the rabbit and Mikkel the fox, which are important characters in these tales. I used a quilting technique, hand-stitched by the women. The women have embroidered their names in Hindi on the back of each mask so they really are one-off pieces.

What happened during the week you were there?

All 200 women came together for the first time and we cut the masks and were able to start. It was quite hectic but by the end of the week they were finally working – a very exciting moment.

What for you was the most interesting or unexpected outcome of the entire experience?

Things I hadn't foreseen or really even thought about. These women had left their tiny villages for the first time and were sitting together having a social life. They were dressed so beautifully and colourfully. It got them out of their homes and they were enjoying each other's company. But the most significant fact for them was that their husbands were cooking lunch – something quite new. It made them laugh to see men working in this way. The social impact of all this was bigger than I ever imagined. I had a fascinating experience, which will hopefully benefit the women in this workshop and their families, and it allowed me the privilege of making a contribution to a better world.

How did their husbands react?

It wasn't their husbands that objected, strangely enough. It was their mothers-in-law that needed convincing. It was all very new for them and an eye-opener for me. The girl of 16 I mentioned before had children the same ages as mine and her mother-in-law was only 45 – the same age as me.

Do you have a particular cherished memory?

It must have been as I was leaving. One of the women came up to me and said: "Thank you for showing me the world."

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Janice Blackburn



Characters
Gullispira the rabbit, above and Pelle the goat