

IN HER SEARCH FOR THE BALANCE BETWEEN MASS-PRODUCED OBJECTS AND TRADITIONALLY CRAFTED ONE-OFFS, DUTCH DESIGNER HELLA JONGERIUS BREATHES NEW LIFE INTO FORGOTTEN DESIGNS AND TECHNIQUES.

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRANK BUDEBANK

LOST AND FOUND

Opposite: Long Neck and Groove Bottle, 2005. Glass, porcelain, packing tape.



'I REALLY DON'T TRY TO IMAGINE HOW EVERYTHING COULD BE BETTER OR NICER LOOKING. DESIGN IN ITSELF DOESN'T INTEREST ME'

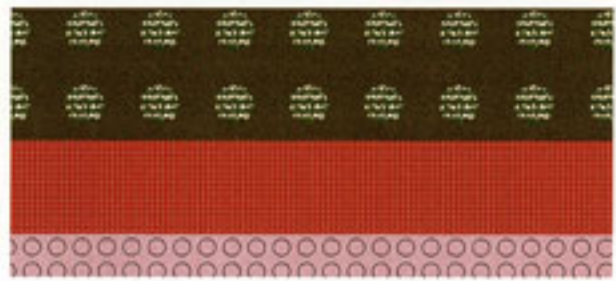
Despite the current plethora of cross-disciplinary work, differences between artists and designers still exist. Most artists, for example, are buried in a sea of flowers at the openings of their exhibitions. Every available pail, wine bottle and tin can is called into service as a temporary vase. As a visitor to many contemporary design shows, however, I recall only one or two instances in which a guest was brave enough to bring the exhibitor an aesthetically correct spray of blossoms. Designers know one another. They might design vases, but they don't plague their colleagues with annoying bouquets that would destroy the character of the ultimate urn. Although they play with practical objects, they often place the resulting designs on a pedestal like works of art, stripped of their functional nature.

Patently aware of this phenomenon, designer Hella Jongerius can chuckle at the humour of the situation. How does it relate to her own work? Her products, though exceptionally beautiful, show little evidence of 'design'. On the contrary, her vases are archetypes that exist by the thousands; the form of her Kasese chair replicates that of an African prayer chair, and her dinnerware has no intention of surpassing the splendour of a Wedgwood service. And let's not forget the fabrics that Jongerius recently designed for textile manufacturer Maharam, which feature existing motifs from the factory archive.

Jongerius has no problem with occupational disability. In the minds of the general public, the stockbroker lies awake at night thinking of



Soft Vase, 1994-1995. Polyurethane. Photography by Bob Goedezwagen.



Pushed Soft Washbasin, 1996. Polyurethane. Photography by Bob Goedezwagen.



Pushed Soft Washbasin, 1996. Polyurethane. Photography by Bob Goedezwagen.

Opposite: Crystal Frack, 2002. Designed for Swarovski, the crystal chandelier looks like a ball gown. The skirt is made of pink rubber letters that spell out something about the world of product design.



'I GUESS I HAVE A GOOD NOSE FOR WHAT'S GOING ON. EVIDENTLY MY PERSONAL PREFERENCES TRANSCEND WHO I AM'

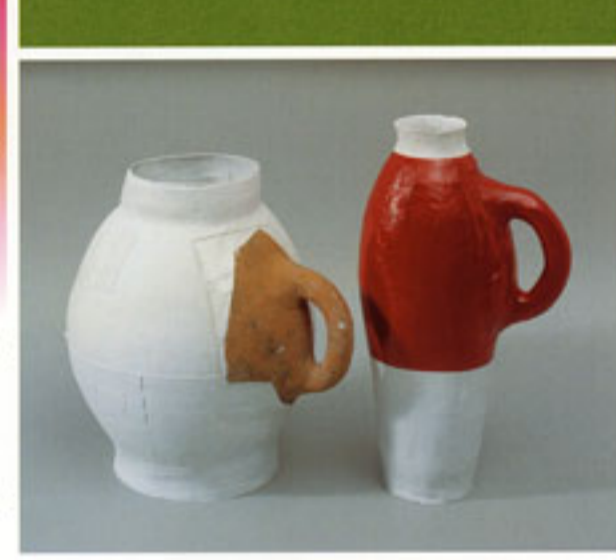
Roughly ten years ago, designers still played a major role in the world, but now they seem to be mired in their own success. The story they tell becomes shorter by the day.

Jongerius's ambition is nothing less than a reassessment of the design profession. 'I'm pushing for new meanings. In creating a single product, you can change the way people think about products in general. That's something I genuinely believe. It explains why I'm not satisfied with my work unless it makes a statement.'

Her Slightly Damaged Dinner Service refers to the importance of perfection as a precondition for becoming attached to an object. Observing the people around her, she noted that they cherished the chipped cups and cracked mugs and grandma's cupboard far more than the pristine service for 12 that every designer of china burns his fingers making.

Consequently, she crafted a second-rate service with minor flaws that make each piece unique. Lengthy experimentation with types of porcelain and various kiln temperatures produced the desired result. The next step was to persuade the ceramics industry (Royal Tichelaar Makkum) to fire her pieces at the 'wrong' temperatures.

An incredible amount of intelligence goes into the creative process. Getting your hands dirty is essential to being a good designer. Concocting something in a purely rational basis provides no new insights, and concepts alone are much too bare. Jongerius would rather delve into materials and manufacturing methods, milking them until they become her own. 'Only when the material pushes



7 pots / 2 cultures / 3 materials, 1996. Porcelain, epoxy, shards of ceramic.



Left: Duff Blue Jug, 2001. Porcelain, bronze, tie wraps. Right: Prince, 2008. Porcelain, silicone.



Duff Blue Plate, 2001. Porcelain, gold wire.



Duff Blue Plate, 2001. Porcelain, gold wire.

Opposite: Repeat Porcelain, 2002. Porcelain, brass.



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products – rubber bathmats (1994), Soft Vases (1994) and Pushed Washbasin (1996) – she forced the properties of polyurethane beyond the usual boundaries. The shapes she chose were, to use her own term, 'archetypal'. 'The world has enough vases. I don't feel the need to come up with a new form. What is important is how materials can add a new dimension to existing forms while combining beauty and concepts'. Later work required research into high-tech synthetic fibres and traditional crafts involving ceramics, glass, textiles and the like.

From the outset, Jongerius's work has revolved around the search for a balance between the mass-produced object and the traditionally crafted one-off. A search that fits both spheres to a higher level: the industrial product is given a soul, and the one-off sheds its frumpy image. In addition to undisturbed working conditions in her own lab, Jongerius needs strong powers of persuasion to convince manufacturers that her ideas are worthy of production.

Sometimes the puzzle pieces fit together perfectly. A prime example is the 'dream project' that Jongerius realised for textile manufacturer Maharam, who knew exactly what they wanted. Maharam asked her to create an upholstery fabric that would turn a suite of chairs into 'cousins – each unique, but all related'. Her solution was Repeat: 16 fabric designs available by the roll, each of which has an unusually long repetitive pattern. In the textile industry, a motif repeated every 30 centimetres is the norm. Such fabrics are easier for manufacturers to use and thus



Slightly Damaged Dinner Service, 1998. Manufactured by Royal Tichelaar Makkum; the plates are all deliberately flawed. Photography by Bob Goedezwagen.

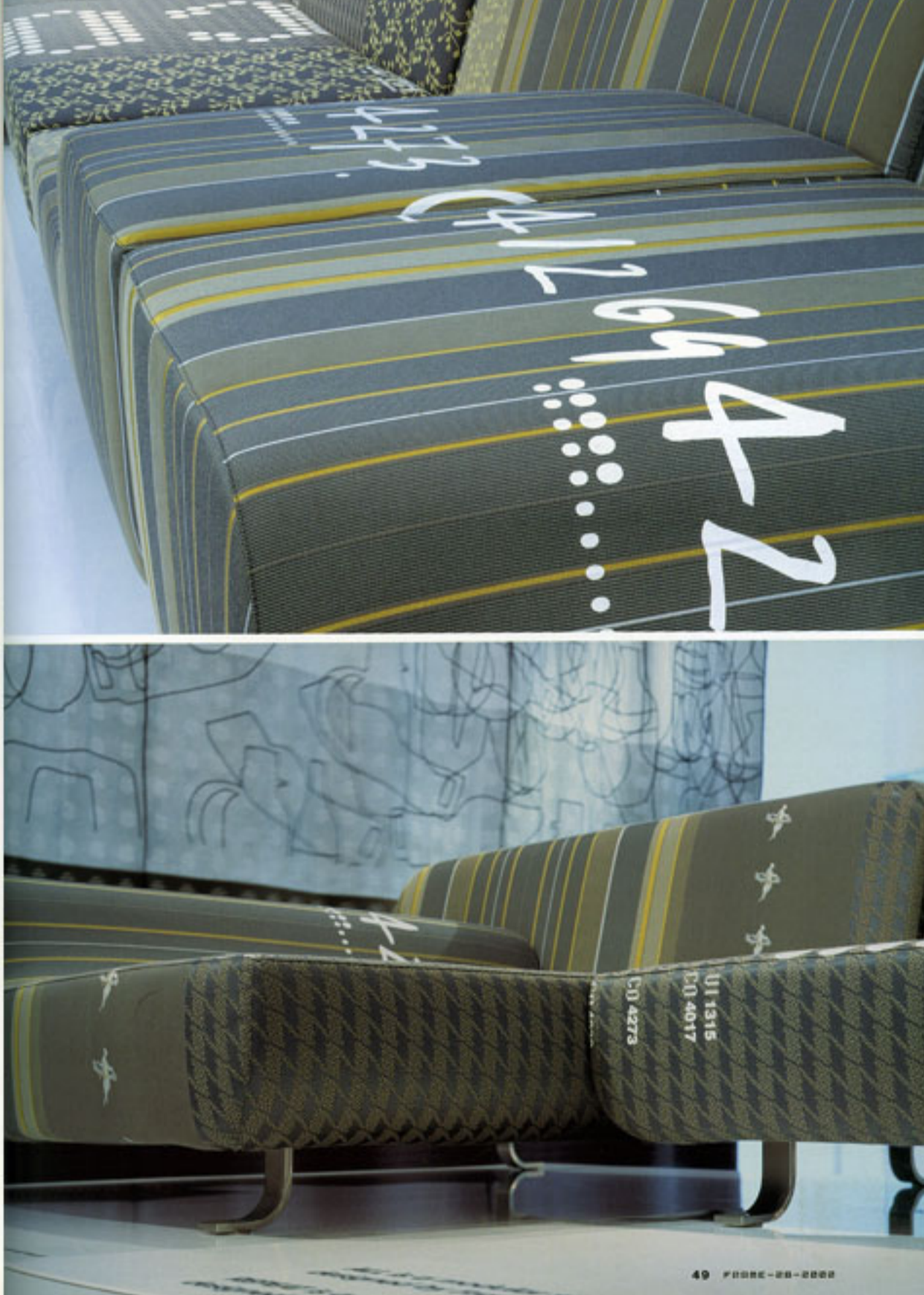


Duff Blue Plate, 2001. Porcelain, gold wire.



Duff Blue Plate, 2001. Porcelain, gold wire.

Opposite: Repeat, 2002. Upholstery textile designed for Maharam. Larger-scale pattern requires just exaggerated repeats of up to 3 metres. When applied to furniture, each piece takes on an individual character, with something in the vocabulary of the grouping.



'ONLY WHEN THE MATERIAL PUSHES THE ENVELOPE DO NEW POSSIBILITIES AND UNEXPECTED CONCEPTS EMERGE'

Maharam and the Mess Design Gallery in New York, where she first exhibited the fabric at a popular one-woman show in May 2002. They took a considerable risk in backing this project.

I remind her of the freedom she claims is essential for working in an undisturbed atmosphere. 'You're right. Working here is always a risk. Throughout the process, you're constantly forced to make concessions. Fortunately, having done the preliminary work – mainly by experimenting with porcelain, strangely enough – I had a lot of self-confidence going in. For years I've been working with the ingredients that come together in this project: old versus new, classic tradition versus banal symbols, and the power of decoration, which can transcend the visual to take on a different meaning.' She's referring to 'mix and match' designs in which she put rubber patterns on porcelain jugs and used ordinary plastic tape to make vases with ceramic bases and glass necks. Like the upholstery fabrics, these too were strange marriages that united old family members without upsetting them of their individuality.

What Jongerius found so exciting about the Maharam project was the additional aspect of mass production. Indeed, for Jongerius, whose work so often betters on the brink of function and practicality, the project formed a field of tension. To what extent is industry prepared to permit experimentation? Ultimately, even the most enthusiastic manufacturer thinks in terms of supply and demand, making decisions that involve potential



Kasese chair, 1999. Carbon-fibre frame with felt or foam cover. Jongerius saved her design of a wooden chair that she saw in Africa. Distributed by Cappellini. Photography by Bob Goedezwagen.



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easier to sell. The Repeat pattern – a full 3 metres long – allows manufacturers to cover several pieces of furniture, none of which are identical to any of the others. Individual pieces within a single family. Jongerius didn't turn to the drawing board, as might be expected, to design a trendy pattern for Repeat. She turned to the archives, walked through the factory and gathered archetypal patterns like pied-de-poule, stripes, and birds and flowers ('bird and vine' in technical jargon). Other discoveries incorporated into her patterns were perforations in punched cards for the looms, and numbers and codes referring to technical data. By changing sizes and colourways, and by distributing prints of enlarged dots and initials – hers and Maharam's – across the patterns, Jongerius created a range of overtones and motifs. The resulting fabrics display a wonderful marriage of old and new, of tradition and street culture.

Jongerius: 'It's a celebration of a product in all its richness. This is about more than the concept and the treatment of materials. It's about the industrial process and making something on a large scale, not to mention marketing. This project, like the Slightly Damaged Dinner Service, requires a user who is expected to contribute his own brand of personal creativity to the work. After all, the fabric invites him to determine which parts of the pattern will appear at which places on the furniture. More remnants than usual make this an expensive material. The salespeople will have to come up with a darn good pitch. She praises the vision of

target groups, a feasibility test, considers ease of use and contemplates possible marketing strategies. Although a designer is not an artist in the traditional sense of the word, Jongerius largely avoids such questions. She does describe her own target group, however, as consumers equipped with vision, creativity and the courage to opt for the audacious. She leaves it up to other designers to make functional vases and tablecloths that don't get embroidered to the dinnerware.

Another industrial commission, this time for crystal king Swarovski, provided an ideal niche for Jongerius's powerful statements. Swarovski asked her and several other designers for innovative chandelier designs. Aware that chandeliers are virtually impossible to modernise, Jongerius seized the opportunity to question the design profession itself. From a distance, her opulently glittering ball gown fits right into the exclusive world of crystal chandeliers. A closer look, however, reveals a pink rubber skirt covered with letters that spell out deceiving queries: 'Can industrial be affectionate?' Can crafts be contemporary? Will design have to crossbreed? Can I only translate what's in the air? Can quality be made without affection? In this design, theory becomes decoration, and decoration asks critical questions.

Jongerius presumably knows the answers all too well.

