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The Frame Moooi Award
juror talks design, fashion
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Material Girl

She trained as a textile designer, so making fabrics for Maharam is a kind of homecoming for Hella Jongerius.

Words Jane Szita

Photos courtesy of Maharam and Jongerius Lab

Hella Jongerius

Process

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Colored Vases

Based on a recurring theme in Jongerius' work, the use of pottery vases as a vehicle for colour experiments (see Frame 78), Colored Vases makes a graphic pattern out of a 3D design project.

- 1 The original design on paper.
- 2 Detail showing a more clearly colour-blocked solution.
- 3 Trouble-shooting: this sample shows an identified flaw (black lines), which needed to be removed from the final textile.
- 4 Colour try-out, representing the colour grid pattern used in the textile.
- 5 The final design.



“Only if I can do what I like,” said Hella Jongerius when asked, in 1999, to design a fabric for the US textiles company Maharam. She proved that she meant to please herself with her first design, a fabric with a 3m repeat (called Repeat) – which was so successful that the collaboration has never ended. A decade on, the relationship between the Dutch-born, Berlin-based designer and the US textiles company is still going strong. Two new fabrics (Hours and Borders) are out already this year, with two more (Colored Vases and Color Wheels) almost ready for launch.

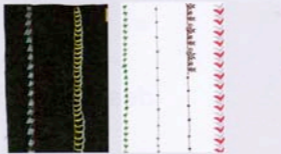
“I want to make outspoken textiles with character, preferably using a new technique,” says Jongerius of her work for Maharam, which falls into two categories that she describes as ‘commercial’ and ‘haute couture’ – more affordable in the first case, more exclusive in the second. It takes about 18 months on average to develop a textile, although Borders took three or four years, she says. Each one starts with an idea, and ‘you can’t separate the design and the production’.

The initial idea for a textile might be communicated as a sketch, or as a woven piece of textile: Jongerius works with textile designer Edith van Berkel on these fabric samples. ‘Borders was made on a sewing machine,’ she says. ‘Whereas Color Wheels and Vases began life on paper.’ Having decided on a motif, Edith van Berkel works out the repeat that will feature in the textile. ‘This is a tricky stage,’ says Jongerius. ‘It’s hard to get right. We have to try it out by draping over a sofa, to see if it works.’

Jongerius communicates her idea to Maharam, which then selects a mill best suited to the concept. ‘Every mill has its own identity,’ explains the designer. ‘There are different yarns, dyes, expertise.’ The mill takes the samples and works on its own trial pieces. ‘They are textile nerds at Maharam,’ says Jongerius. ‘It’s like algebra. They have so much technical expertise. The person making the translation from design to loom is very important, it has to be someone who clicks with me and Maharam.’

The mill choice is a trade secret, but cost factors play a role. For lower priced, ‘commercial’ fabrics as the designer terms them, US mills are used. For ‘couture’ textiles requiring more elaborate techniques, the mills will most probably be located in Europe. Jongerius has only recently begun working on the lower priced end of the market. ‘An interesting challenge,’ she says. ‘It’s a different taste, different people. You want to find the same quality and creative expression, even in this lower priced market.’

After samples are worked up into ‘a pattern, construction and feel that we are all happy with’, the fabrics are sent to the testing lab for certification. The colour



7 Samples showing try-outs of various embroidery stitches.

work follows this process. Colour samples are made with the textile, producing perhaps 50 variations from which Jongerius, together with Maharam, selects the shades (typically two to five) that feature in the finished product. ‘The market – Europe or America – plays a role in the colour choice for Maharam,’ comments Jongerius.

So how do Jongerius’ textile designs relate to her other work? ‘I do have a talent for facility,’ she says. ‘I trained in textiles and I can weave, knit and sew. But I’d never done it until I worked for Maharam. I’d forgotten how much I love it, actually. In all my work though, there’s an interest in crafts done in an industrial way. Weaving is an ancient craft, even though it’s done in an industrial mill. Certain themes recur throughout my career – seams and embroidery I’ve used in product design, too. What I really like about textiles is that it’s a kind of half fabrication. You’re making something that can be used for anything: it’s not defined.’

Borders

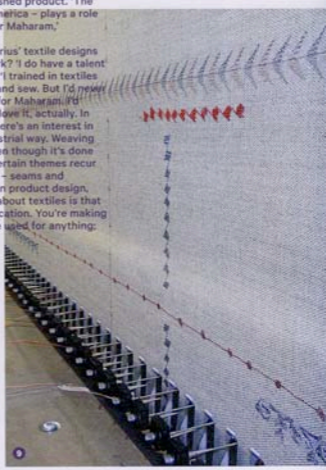
Continuing the exploration of embroidery that began with Layers in 2008, Jongerius based Borders on her interest in the traditional backstrap weaving of Guatemala and Mexico, in which the loom is tethered between the weaver’s body and a tree or post. Because backstrap weaving produces a narrow cloth, two or more pieces are often hand embroidered together using a heavy decorative stitch. Borders is an industrial translation of this localized craft technique.

6 Designs showing the basic idea of sections divided by embroidery

7 Samples showing try-outs of various embroidery stitches.

8 The selections of stitches used include archetypal motifs culled from different sources, including a botanical, a dotted line, and pied de poule.

9 The finalized fabric being woven. The embroidery forms an irregular grid composition.

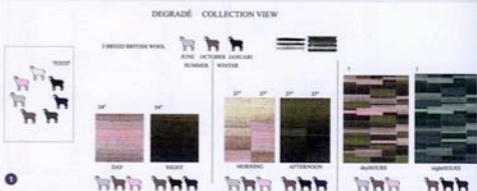


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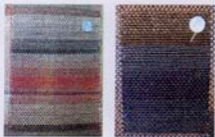
Hours

Jongerius was inspired by sheep – specifically, three British breeds – and the natural colour variations in their wool in different seasons and varying light conditions. The fabric was developed with a mill in Scotland, using spun woollen yarns in a dense traditional dobby-weave that lends it a distinct homespun quality. The box draw splits the warp into sections that can be individually manipulated, while the double weave allows certain yarns to come to the face while others are concealed. A knitted rayon accent yarn adds an occasional streak of lustre. Hours is available in two colours, Day and Night.

- 1 An overview of Jongerius' initial designs for Hours, showing its inspiration in the coats of sheep.
- 2 Samples showing different try-outs for colour variation.
- 3 Colour charts for Day and Night.
- 4 The finished fabric.



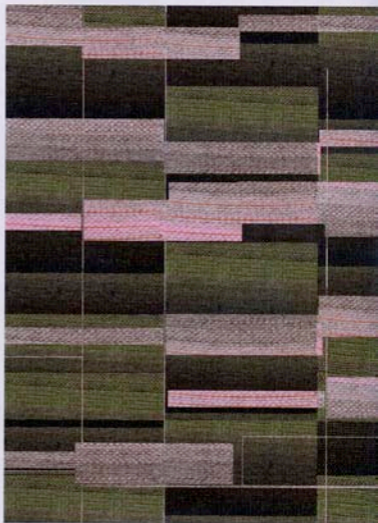
'You can't separate the design from the production'



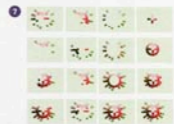
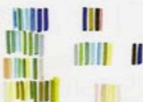
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Color Wheels

The idea for Color Wheels grew naturally out of Jongerius' interest in colour. The wheel, often used for her colour research, is abstracted into a graphic pattern.

- 1 Initial sketches for the design of Color Wheels.
- 2 Textile try-out in Jongerius' studio.
- 3 The design broken into separate elements.
- 4 A further sample, showing additional modification, clarifying the design.
- 5 The finished fabric.