

Since the great success of Droog Design put it firmly on the map in the early 1990s, Dutch design has enjoyed an international reputation out of all proportion to the size of the small country that produces it. Any visitor to the Netherlands will quickly notice that everything Dutch is well designed – down to the simple cotton buds packaging at HEMA, the popular low-cost Dutch retailer, where even the humblest products look good. At the other end of the scale, some of the world's most acclaimed designers are Dutch – such as Marcel Wanders, who has created a number of modern museum pieces, like the Knotted Chair. When asked about chair design, he once said its importance is, "My butt. To understand a good butt." A sense of humour is a vital ingredient in most Dutch design. But why should such a small nation produce so much good design? According to concept developer and trend watcher Monique Willemse, who has collaborated with M-real on developing design-friendly papers, "Dutch design is a direct reflection of the country's DNA. Dutch people are very individualistic." Another typical characteristic is its down-to-earth, practical quality, though Willemse points out that, "The conceptual thought usually prevails over the functional aspect of design, giving the space to come up with designs that aren't only functional, but clever and rebellious."

STREETWISE

Historically, the Dutch have always been keen traders, eager to create new business opportunities. This makes them innovative, with a way of combining technical knowledge and streetwise creativity. "Joris Laarman's Heatwave, a concrete radiator, shows a baroque decoration that is not only unique but – thanks to its design – improves the heating function," says Willemse. The Dutch are also stubborn, as their much-admired mastery of the elements demonstrates. Hella Jongerius works on the cusp of design, craft, art and technology to fuse traditional and contemporary influences, high tech and low tech, the industrial and artisanal. She succeeds in combining ce-

ramic and glass, two incompatible materials, joining them together into unusual vases. "This shows the Dutch determination to make the impossible work," says Willemse. "The result is outstanding."

During the 1990s, Hella Jongerius was one of the first designers to collaborate with Droog Design, a group of designers whose varied products are united by a combination of innovation and nostalgia that is tongue-in-cheek, but more importantly, engaging. Today Droog is synonymous with Dutch design. Yet the importance of design has long been embedded in the culture. "The Dutch have always found it important to have one beautiful room in their house. In the past, even in poor houses, there would always be one stylish room which the owners would only use on special occasions," says Willemse. "Even nowadays, if you stroll along the canals of Amsterdam, you'll see that Dutch people never close their curtains at dusk, allowing everyone to peek into the living room." An awareness of what good furniture or objects can communicate is part of the Dutch tradition, expressing identity as well as a sense of belonging.

PROMISING FUTURE

While the Netherlands has always been a creative environment for designers, Dutch design is living through a particularly creative phase, according to Willemse: "With its 46,000 designers, everyone is looking at the tulip country, signalling that there is definitely something going on here," she says. "The future looks very promising." An interesting theme today is crossing borders, combining different disciplines. "It's about freedom in choosing and mixing media," says Willemse. Examples she gives includes the work of artist, VJ, and designer Micha Klein, and fashion designer Bas Kosters who now expresses himself also through an image column in *Blend*, a magazine about fashion, people, media and art. *Art on a Box* is a concept by graphic designer Loes Schepens whereby artists decorate ship containers. The first container by Hugo Kaagman focusses on Amsterdam as sea harbour, and is now travelling around the world.



PRINTERS POSTCARD FROM AMSTERDAM

Set up in 2001 in Germany and 2003 in Austria, M-real Printers Club represents a customer loyalty programme for printers, designers and marketers. The club offers a wide range of services for the members, e.g. sample sendings, workshops and seminars, regular communication about market trends and product news. Core element of the club is the bonus system which allows the members to offer a variety of premiums to their own customers and to their employees in order to increase customer loyalty and staff motivation.

The trip to Amsterdam was the first of its kind, giving the Printers Club members a unique guided tour through the latest design hotspots in the city. Among the activities organized were a "meet & greet" session with famous Dutch shoe designer Jan Jansen, a visit to the studio of typography designer Ewald Spieker and an architectural bicycle tour through Amsterdam's new islands. Droog Design and Frozen Fountain were other highlights of the programme. And of course there was enough time to visit some of the bookstores that are specialized on design. The participants were enthusiastic about the new impressions and got a lot of inspiration for their future work.