



Twenty-First Century Design

new design icons, from mass
market to avant-garde

Marcus Fairs

Foreword by **Marcel Wanders**



OPPOSITE: The Campana Brothers' Melissa shoes.
BELOW: Ordinary Furniture, designed by Ineke Hans.

the designer or architect is selected for his or her celebrity as much as his or her talent, and the resulting product or building is as much a marketing device for the brand or city as anything else – would until recently have been dismissed as superficial. But recent years have also seen a resurgent belief in the importance of aesthetics for their own sake. In her 2004 book *The Substance of Style*, American writer Virginia Postrel argues that we have now entered the “Age of Aesthetics”, a period in which the way things look is every bit as important as the way they work.

This debate reached an explosive head later the same year at London's Design Museum when James Dyson – inventor of the Dyson vacuum cleaner and chairman of the museum's trustees – resigned in disgust at the curatorial policy of the then director Alice Rawsthorn. Rawsthorn, sensing that design was increasingly becoming as much about styling, concept and attitude as about creating functional products, organized a series of shows celebrating media-friendly stylists, such as Marc Newson and shoe designer Manolo Blahnik, at the expense of the type of industrial products epitomized by Dyson's own products. But Rawsthorn had correctly identified design's zeitgeist: architecture and design are now in many ways inseparable from marketing and entertainment.

Design has also started to come to the attention of wealthy connoisseurs who would formerly have collected works of art. A whole new industry has grown up in the last few years whereby

galleries and auction houses are promoting the work of avant garde designers, such as Ron Arad and Zaha Hadid, as if they were paintings or sculptures – and often with prices to match. This is partly because contemporary art as a commodity has become so expensive as to be almost unaffordable to many discerning buyers; and also partly because tables, chairs and lights by celebrity designers increasingly display as much formal ingenuity and technical brilliance as the work of leading artists, but lack the baffling conceptual hyperbole that usually accompanies art. After all, a chair is still a chair, no matter how complex its manufacture or obscure its inspiration.

Function and concept

To many designers, the functional requirement of a product is increasingly taking second place to the concept. The rise of Dutch “conceptual” design in the 1990s, spearheaded by the Droog collective, signified a key break with the past, as designers abandoned the idea of taking form and function as their starting point and instead began with a narrative or a cultural observation. Jurgen Bey's Tree Trunk Bench (see page 162), for example, takes as its starting point the idea that a felled tree trunk lying in a forest is equally useful as a seat to anything a designer might produce; Bey then simply adds traditional chair backs cast in bronze to domesticate the raw log and make its function unequivocal. Dutch design has had a huge influence: Stuart Haygarth's Tide chandelier (see page 228),



Ordinary

Date 2005

Designer Ineke Hans

Material Recycled plastic



This range of chairs and tables is designed to look as if it was not designed. Inspired by the anonymous objects she had seen in folk art museums, Ineke Hans wanted to produce furniture that looked as ordinary as possible. Seemingly made of roughly cut timber boards that have been nailed together, the chairs and tables of her Ordinary furniture collection deliberately evoke the unselfconscious objects that ordinary people once fabricated from the materials they had to hand, responding to a direct and pressing need and discovering which combinations of material and form worked by trial and error. They also provide only basic levels of comfort, offering the minimum required of a table or chair. However, the pieces are actually made of black recycled plastic with a wood-grain finish. This relatively new material, which is used in the Netherlands to create canalside boardwalks, gives away the fact that the furniture is contemporary. It also has the advantage of being wind-, water-, salt-, acid- and UV-resistant, making it extremely long-lasting and suitable for indoor and outdoor

use. Although a relatively cheap material, the range is sold as a luxury product in upmarket designer furniture shops.

This combination of ancient and modern, luxury and anti-luxury, rich and poor is typical of Hans' work, as is the use of black: she has experimented with using the colour on children's toys, ceramic tableware and other unexpected applications. Ordinary furniture began in 1997 when Hans produced a simple picnic table and bench but in 2005 she expanded the range, adding a barstool, lounge chair, coffee table and a Deluxe chair (so-called in jest because, unlike the earlier benches, it has a back).

Hans is one of the Netherlands' leading young designers. Much of her furniture explores archetypal forms, like a child's stick-like pictograms of a table, chair or house. The Ordinary furniture pieces, like her other designs, have a toy-like quality and attempt to reduce chairs and tables to an essence that conforms to people's unconscious expectations of what such items should look like.



Black Gold

Date **2005**

Designer **Ineke Hans**

Material **Porcelain**



This range of porcelain ware by one of the leading Dutch designers, Ineke Hans, is as striking as it is unsettling. Using a black pigment that is not normally associated with ceramics, and that weakens the clay structurally, the pieces have a resultingly lopsided appearance. The range is the result of Hans' three-month residency at the European Ceramics Work Centre – a residential centre of excellence in Hertogenbosch in the Netherlands that invites designers to experiment with ceramic production techniques and which has done much to stimulate the revival of interest in ceramics among contemporary designers. While at the centre, Hans developed an interest in the way tableware is mass-produced from moulded elements – such as a mug and handle or a teapot and spout – that are “welded” together using slip clay. Her Black Gold range is an exploration of how to make the maximum number of different items from the minimum number of different moulded elements.

Hans, who was born in 1966 in the Netherlands and graduated from the Hogeschool voor de Kunsten in Arnhem in 1991 and the Royal College of Art in London in 1995, is now based in Arnhem. She produced a total of just five modular, moulded forms – tubes of three different diameters, a bent section and a funnel shape – that can be combined to produce vases, coffee pots, candelabras and so on. Each shape is designed to be used in various ways: for example, the narrow tube has an internal diameter suitable for holding candles and an external diameter appropriate for a handle. These elements are then manipulated, cut and joined together to produce the pieces in the range. Though entirely rational, the pieces have a primitive quality that is more akin to plumbing elements than fine dining ware, while the use of black pigment renders them even more unusual. Since it affects the strength of the clay, it also causes the larger elements to buckle during firing (see also page 174).



Garlic Crusher

Date **2005**

Designer **Ineke Hans**

Material **Stainless steel**

Manufacturer **Royal VKB, Netherlands**

Garlic crushers tend to be over-complicated mechanical devices that are messy and hard to wash. With this simple object, Dutch designer Ineke Hans has completely rethought the process of this culinary activity. Her product is a rare example of a designer abandoning a well-known product typology in favour of something new – and the manufacturer's decision to back the idea is equally rare. Instead of the usual method of crushing garlic, which involves squeezing it through a die in a hinged, hand-held press, Hans' version involves crushing the clove beneath a roller.

Measuring 18 cm (7 in) long and with a diameter of 3.5 cm (1 1/2 in), the crusher is made of solid stainless steel. The object is so self-explanatory and intuitive it hardly needs explaining: the cylindrical roller is used in the same way as a rolling pin, with a hand gripping either end and rolling the device back and forth while applying downward pressure with the wrists. The serrated section between the hands grips and pulverizes the garlic, a method which the manufacturer, Dutch kitchenware brand Royal VKB, claims leads to a more intense garlic flavour. It is certainly a lot easier to clean: you simply rinse it under the tap. Hans also claims that rubbing your hands against the device under a running tap removes the odour of garlic, thanks to the composition of the steel.

