

# The Dutch Spirit in Milan

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**The Dutch descend upon Milan for a week every year. Shining at the Salone is not that difficult, provided you have some good design to show, but living and working in Milan is a completely different matter. We spoke to a number of Dutch industrial designers, who moved southwards during the eighties and nineties to try their luck in northern Italy, studying for a year at the Domus Academy, or diving into the unknown for a longer period of time. An exciting, revolutionary time. Experimentation equals learning, so it seems. Nowadays, do we see the dawning of a new revolution?**

Let's start with a much-loved cliché: Milan as the Mecca for fashion and design. But is that still true in relation to industrial design? The economic crisis of the past years has caused deep wounds, and especially in Italy manufacturers are more cautious when commissioning assignments. Furthermore, thanks to the success of design in previous years professionals have emerged from everywhere, making it easy for Italian companies to choose whomever they want, and – how Dutch – at the lowest possible cost. The crisis has become an excuse.

But the crisis has not only created challenges, but also change. Just as in the seventies and eighties, when designers felt the need to do something different. After being disillusioned with the lack of progress in architecture and product design, which was still clinging to Modernism or earlier art movements, Studio Alchimia, which included among others Ettore Sottsass, Alessandro Mendini and Andrea Branzi, moved on to form a new style. Their aim was to create revolutionary design, rather than consumer orientated products, from cheap, everyday materials, with asymmetrical characteristics and exuberant decoration in bright colours. This design movement paved the way for the Memphis Group in the eighties. Just in those decades Milan was sizzling with energy.

Maarten Kusters (1956) fell in love with Italy whilst undertaking an internship at a wooden furniture company in Friuli. Back in the Netherlands, in 1981, he was informed about a yet-to-be-created postgraduate school: the Domus Academy, a spin-off from the magazine *Domus*. Andrea Branzi had been asked to become the director. An article from 1987 in *Items* describes the vibe at the academy at that time. Kusters: "Most designers were being educated as architects. The Domus Academy's ambition was to become after Ulm a major player in design education in Europe and, helped by raving reviews in *Domus*, it worked as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Being there was a wonderful experience, the crème de la crème of architects and designers came over for (guest) lectures, debates... from Ettore Sottsass to Mario Bellini, from Alberto Meda to Philippe Starck."

After working as an assistant during the 1983 foundation year, Branzi invited Kusters to become design-training assistant for the academy, which meant teaching courses and supporting students. Kusters also worked for Italian companies such as Cassina and Edra. His oval couch *No Stop* became talk of the town. "The seat is pierced with two mechanisms which facilitate rotation of the cushions," explains Kusters. "You can sit or lie on it in many ways. The couch was no bestseller: lack of worldwide distribution and too expensive, I think. I could not afford one myself!"

Being an art director for Molteni & Molteni, specializing in steel furniture, he designed an extensive chair collection, which resulted in an exhibition of the brand STEEL during the 1990 Salone del Mobile. STEEL was in a way an international young designers movement. Kusters: "The press loved it: youngsters against the old guard. During the first STEEL presentation, our press release was about the so-called *Carry-seat*: a trolley to carry catalogues, which could be converted into a chair to have a rest. Two more collections followed, but despite the buzz, the brand disappeared after five years." Kusters continued with his small design studio in Milan, working in furniture design and other design disciplines. In 2006 he decided to return to his home country.

The lack of organization and structure in Italy, which demands improvisation, was one of the appealing factors for Geert Koster (1961). He joined the Domus Academy in 1984, inspired by the radical design of the Memphis Group. "In the 1980s design was not really happening in the Netherlands," he recalls. "There the motto was:

'impossible', whereas in Italy one shouted: *'Proviamo!'* (Let's just try it). In Milan design was a lifestyle, in Holland a profession. It was a moment in time when everything was possible and when different disciplines like architecture, design, fashion and graphic design were merged into one big activity."

Koster decided to stay, worked for Studio De Lucchi and Olivetti and is still working for mainly Italian clients or foreign clients who appreciate the Italian design approach. "Design business is huge here, Italy is a country full of contrasts that still offers a lot of possibilities," although he realizes that because of the economic situation design is taking a more cautious approach. "There is less experimenting and for *artigiani* it is difficult to stay in business, which means a lot of craftsmanship is disappearing. At the same time new technological developments are becoming more important in the industrial production companies, which because of international take-overs have become much bigger cartels. Therefore Italy risks losing its typical Italian design image. Globalisation is everywhere."

Due to the increasing globalization, one can no longer talk about Dutch or Italian Design, is the opinion of Lou Beeren (1940), now retired and living in Groningen. From 1975 he spent many years working in Milan for Philips as a design director of large domestic appliances. "In the optimistic fifties, sixties, seventies and eighties Italian Design was leading, which coincided with the Italian *Wirtschaftswunder* of companies such as Olivetti and Fiat. Now the traditional *maakindustrie* (manufacturing industry) has been replaced by the *smaakindustrie* ('flavor' industry: fashion, furniture, gift items [Alessi]). The current political, economic, social and cultural conditions are reflected in design, showing a clear lack of confidence."

In an article in trade magazine *Vormberichten* in 2007 he wrote how relevant Dutch Design actually is economically and socially: "(...) very limited. Except in a few galleries and shops in Amsterdam and New York, there is no question of a breakthrough towards industry. The most negative side of this is that each year many designers are put on the market who virtually have no chance. (...) As a result, the market is highly diluted and the supply too big. Many producers now know that, for little or no money, they can easily outsource their design projects." In this article, he argues for limiting government subsidies, less but better education and a good climate for entrepreneurs.

Koster, who was involved in the 'invasion' of the Dutch Design in Milan in the nineties and organized many Dutch design presentations in the city, thinks there will be increasingly less space for Dutch design graduates in Italy. "Companies work with a select group of success guaranteed designers, leading to a loss of power of experimental and radical twentieth century Italian design. For the Dutch design scene it is important to be less experimental and more realistic. It should focus more on innovation and manufacturable products. Dutch Design is for Designers, Italian Design is for Consumers."

## Allure

Distinguished Italian companies such as Kartell, Artemide, Cappellini, Cassina, Foscarina or Molteni rather work with international stars than young beginners; their image helps selling the product. But in the early nineties there was still hope for young adventurers in Milan. In 1990 Barro de Gast (1966) decided after being a student at the Domus Academy to try his luck. "Alessi shook up design by their Family Follows Fiction presentation at the Salone," he remembers. "A plastic collection of figurative forms, creating a 'family' around fictitious characters. Everybody knew: this is weird, this is different, but there was a lot of disdain:







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is this 'high style' Alessi, with its timeless, stable line of products? Thanks to the King-Kong Production Group (Stefano Giovannoni and Guido Venturini) these plastic transparent objects were being pushed, and suddenly everybody went on copying this playful style."

De Gast stayed in Milan and worked for clients mainly from Germany and the United States. "They probably thought: a Dutchman living in Italy must be good. This helped building my own agency. It was a great time to be in Milan. At a younger age you don't mind uncertainty. But I became tired of promises that weren't kept as soon as there was concrete action. In the end you have a product that has to be paid for. I went on realizing that as a freelancer: Italy is a beautiful country, but mainly for taking a holiday."

In the eighties and nineties it was different, agrees Maurice Mentjens (1964). He followed a summer course at the Domus Academy. "Sottsass, Branzi, Michele de Lucchi were there, and you could bump into famous foreigners like Ron Arad, Philippe Starck and Ingo Maurer." Mentjens does not think the current crisis affects the design world too much: "I'm sure that many companies are still doing very well. They use the crisis as an excuse to avoid paying designers the full amount. The Salone is still going strong. Though it seems as if less great designers are there. Back then Arad, Branzi, Starck and Newson all had their own special presentations in the inner city. Expos in the Design Gallery at Via Manzoni were amazing experiences, just like the exhibitions and parties of Ron Arad and Ingo Maurer at Spazio Krizia and later on at the Dolce & Gabbana Headquarters. Once, in the wake of my best friend Ernest Mourmans and the still young and pretty Marc Newson and Ross Lovegrove, I went out, invited by Simon Le Bon of Duran Duran to club Hollywood. After a Newson party at Barbasso, we went there and all models fainted at the sight of Le Bon..."

In 1990, the Tortona design expo area was not as important, he remembers. "Around 1995 Cappellini and others began exhibiting there. Every location downtown was still affordable. The most awesome designs were there to see. Thanks to Ernest I came in contact with Sottsass, my idol. At an exhibition I was able to shake his hand for the first time. My hero came in ... shock and awe! Nervously I lit a cigarette, finished it in five puffs. When I was doing interiors in Maastricht he wanted to come and watch. Really, me

showing God my work? Hastily I made a portfolio booklet and gave it to him, and he surprisingly even wanted to have a lamp for his apartment. Beyond proud I was. An extraordinary man. One of the last people in design who was averse to stardom."

Arnout Visser (1962) lives and works in Arnhem, but was a postgraduate at the Domus Academy in 1990 and stayed for another year. "I loved it there, Memphis and Studio Alchimia were hot and happening," he says. "Instead of turning into a Memphis clone I learned how to develop my own style, which was stimulated by the teachers. In 1990, during the first three months of training, I made *Salad Sunrise*, an oil-vinegar set; my teacher Andrea Branzi encouraged that simple design instead of giving it a Baroque touch. Renny Ramakers, who went on to found Droog Design, wrote about it in *Items*. Once Droog Design was founded, the oil-vinegar set was included in its collection."

The Dutch added Dutch sobriety to Italian design after the 'bombastic' Memphis style, Visser thinks. With an emphasis on the concept, and made out of unexpected low budget materials. He remarks that there is no city in the world where so many designers want to work such long hours for very little compensation. "There are still trainees who pay money to work as an intern somewhere," he says somewhat surprised. "Every few years a new crisis comes along. At the last Salone I saw a wonderful exhibition that proved that crisis stimulates creative thinking. Great to see how bright ideas and used, low-cost materials constitute beautiful design; crisis as an inspiration!" He is a little concerned about the craftsmen who are struggling. "In Milan, in basements survivors continue specializing in working wood, leather and other fabrics, even though in China they make the same for one fortieth of the price. But people stay proud and dress with allure. Dutch designers visit exhibitions in a turtleneck sweater with jeans and sneakers. Do I prefer still living in Italy? If my wife Anja had not come along, that would not be unthinkable."

#### New possibilities

In 1990 Piet Billekens (1966) worked as an intern in Milan. After graduating in Eindhoven he went back, and applied for a design job at Cesana, a company specialized in bathroom systems. Eventually he became head of the development department, showing the manufacturers the importance of design. After the bankruptcy of Cesana in 2013, Billekens established his own agency in Milan,

Left page  
Table Dos and couch No Stop  
by Maarten Kusters

This page  
Salad Sunrise XL by Arnout  
Visser for Droog.

working mainly for Italian clients. He has seen many Dutch designers come and go. Speaking on the phone from the Bad Messe in Frankfurt: "It is important to be introduced by a third party. Building trust is key. Details speak more than formal business aspects. For me luck was an important factor. Designing a piece of furniture is relatively simple, compared to the bathing industry, where you encounter things like installation, water pressure, electricity, tiling, bricklaying and so on. The last fifteen years a new type of Italian designers has emerged, who are more specialized and product-orientated, with much knowledge of new materials. This market demands design skills that are common but yet have a specific identity, to avoid quick Chinese copying."

Jan Puylaert (1963) left in 1988 for Italy to study bionics at the Istituto Europeo di Design (IED) in Milan. "Italy was known worldwide for its design while the Netherlands were merely technical. I love Italy for being without rules," he says. "The Italian way of being creative is born out of necessity. No one helps each other. Certainties do not exist here, let alone subsidy. In the Netherlands at the time an engineer achieved his preconceived solution from a book, and the designers helped him finalize the edges. In Italy, however, it is the designer that first draws the concept, often together with the client (and a bottle of Campari). The Italian client is looking for the unknown future and believes in the designer, and this future is not to be found in a book." In 2000 Puylaert opened his own Milan based design and production company WET®, also the name of a bathroom brand offering a new concept of low budget design. "It's all wonderfully complicated with little income or free time. We are busy with both design and production and selling through our store showroom. Such a direct connection with the audience gives us a very different view on design. In terms of timing, I think that the busier the better: the faster a draft should be ready, strangely enough, the better design comes out. In terms of production Italy is my country. Sales I do elsewhere. The Netherlands could be a very good partner for Italy nowadays. For years I have produced top products in Italy for often less than half of the Dutch costs."

Another design entrepreneur, Jacco Bregonje (1964), who left for Italy in 1992, still lives and works there. Last year he and his brother Tanno among others even took over Italian furniture brand Felicerossi. Design happens between vision and reality, he believes. "It emerges at the synthesis of control and let go. The Netherlands taught me to think methodically, Italy to let go. I strive to combine the best of both worlds." He knows that Italian design acts from within the industry, which thrives in good times. Dutch design is more self-producing, putting focus on the designer, with government aid. "The Dutch are strong in difficult times and do maximal things with minimal means. Italians are sensitive in their design to esthetical and cultural values, are driven by intuition, and reflect in action. Beauty is everywhere, in nature, architecture, people, daily life. But the system is in turmoil, strengthening individuality's and self-determination's grip on society."

Both Memphis Group in the eighties and Droog Design a decade later put their countries' design on the international map. They challenged mainstream design and searched for new forms of expression. "The eighties were power years with more focus on appearance, while in the nineties inner values were important. The new school will be a merge of Dutch and Italian design, but also from other countries," Bregonje predicts. "Dutch designers are searching for more connection with industry while that same industry is looking for more values, not just selling a successful product. Having a relationship with nature, sustainability, services and information are key ingredients that have international attention."