



# ONCE UPON A TIME...

INTRODUCTION  
BY SHONQUIS MORENO

— ... seems a fitting way to begin the tale of Marcel Wanders. Dutch director of the eponymous design studio, art director and co-founder of furniture label Moooi, Wanders does not merely make marvelous objects; he invents worlds in which the mass-produced is handmade, floors and walls grow into forests, and a couch can make a change of costume as quickly as a supermodel. Working in central Amsterdam in a former schoolhouse filled with the engrossingly clashing patterns of his own carpets, wallpapers, and tiles, Wanders is the Willy Wonka of the design world—a fantasist, and sometimes fabulist, as shiny bright as he is deliciously dark.

That said, it would be naïve to confuse Wanders with the characters he creates. He is as much businessman as showman—a rational romantic and a great reconciler of opposites. In fact, there are words, usually contradictory, that Wanders dislikes—“baroque” and “minimal” are two that come to mind—but which must nonetheless be applied to his work. Synthesized in a single object, these qualities tell a much more sophisticated story. In fact, one thing that distinguishes Wanders’ work is that every vase, every brush stroke, each interior contains, even narrates, a tiny tale. And at the heart of all the stories, or perhaps dispersed throughout them all, is Wanders’ own remarkable tale.

Indeed, Wanders’ history lends itself tidily to legend. Having famously flunked out of the Eindhoven Design Academy after only one year, Wanders redoubled his academic efforts at a craft and jewelry school in Maastricht, followed by a Belgian design school, eventually transferring to the Arnhem School of the Arts. He graduated with honors in 1988 with one of his chairs and a collection of ceramics already in production, his thesis project featured on the cover of a national design magazine, and having won three design competitions that year alone.

In 1993, Wanders joined Gijs Bakker and Renny Ramakers at Droog Design’s first exhibition in Milan. Droog was making what Wanders calls “virtual design”—high concept objects that tend to thrive in prototypes and in the media but rarely make it into the shops and do not always sell if they do.

“Virtual design flies without the weight of its business principles,” says Wanders, whose now iconic Knotted Chair was presented by Droog in 1996. “I understand that people want to be in this virtual world. They love it—it’s their poetry. But we cannot forget the core idea of design, which is to create things that people enjoy. To me, it’s important to do both. Virtual design is fabulous—and inspirational. It’s there to enhance our feeling of who we can be one day. But, aside from being an opportunity, virtual design can be a dilemma.”



# EXTRA BEAUTIFUL: ART DIRECTION & ARCHETYPES

Wanders founded Moooi to prove that he could do “realistic design.” From 1995 until 2001, he had worked under the rubric Wanders Wonders before establishing the Marcel Wanders studio and then Moooi (with Casper Vissers), in order to design for a larger public. Moooi means “beautiful” in Dutch, but is spelled with an extra “o” to underscore the meaning of the word as one might if drawing it out for emphasis while speaking. Aside from wanting to make design that is widely available, Wanders, who serves as the company’s art director, also believes fervently, and true to his industrial design roots, in producing large editions: in numbers, an object’s potential influence on culture is amplified.

Wanders has an entrepreneurial father to thank for his commercial flamboyance. He exploits the tropes of theater and highly stylized storytelling that anthropomorphize objects in sometimes surreal but always engaging ways. For an *Intramuros* cover in 2002, he made a portrait of himself with his thick hair pomaded tightly against his head. Over his nose, he wore a spherical golden pendant necklace of his own design that made him look like a mystic clown. “This,” recalls Wanders, “was me playing around with a minimalist world and a decorative world. The *Nosé* said something about me, obviously: I look at design in a different way—it’s very exaggerated.” Today, the image of Wanders wearing the *Nosé* has become as ubiquitous as his furniture and print ads, woven into a gold-threaded upholstery fabric for the Moooi sofa called, aptly, **JESTER**. Like the earliest image of the



jester, Wanders is the wise fool, the worldly escapist. Often, Wanders describes products as archetypes and characters—a seductive Italian woman named *Bisazza*, for instance—or as if they had come to him in the fragments of a dream. But he never finds inspiration in his actual dreams: “If I speak about dreams,” he explains, “I speak about daydreams. They are illusions at the moment that I build them. I call them dreams because they are so airy when they arrive; they travel on the wind of thought.” With this high-flying fantasy language and provocative imagery—Moooi models are shot naked and in sometimes acrobatic poses beside or on the furniture—it is easy to mistake Wanders’ creative romanticism for commercial cynicism. But if he is pushing something, it is invariably because he has already bought it himself.

“I’m constantly trying to sell something to everyone,” he says. “In fact, I’m trying to sell you a story right now: I’m trying to make you understand me.”

Another expressive outlet for Wanders’s storytelling has been designing events. Since 2005, he and his girlfriend (accomplished Dutch choreographer Nanine Linning) “choreograph” an unconventional cocktail hour by suspending Linning from a vast fiberglass *Happy Hour Chandelier* at parties, where she pours champagne for guests.

“Theater,” the designer points out, “is a great way to reach an audience.”

# THE HEART IN THE MACHINE

Wanders’ penchant for theater is, in part, a desire to place the human at the heart of the machine. Following the industrial revolution, as Wanders has long suggested, we increasingly manufactured our world using machines instead of craftspeople. But in his opinion, we adhered for longer than necessary to the dogmas and aesthetics of that period—it was reduced to a style.

“In the past, people thought machines were interesting because they could perform better, and we came to love our engineering more than the people around us,” he says. “But as soon as I brought the human story back into design, people started to react to it.”

Form no longer needs to remain shackled to function. For Wanders, a design must go beyond simple operational proficiency to be successful—it must tell a story, elicit a feeling, and absorb us. As he once wrote: “There is nothing wrong with telling what is logical, honest, or obvious. On the other hand, the story will often be a dull one. The creative spirit is capable of much more than this sober, limited design truth. It is time to tell a different story—one that is more interesting, inspiring, and valuable, which gives new meaning and not only matches but expands our view of the world. I believe that designers ought to take ‘honest lies’ seriously because they offer an opportunity to give real meaning to our environment and to exert a positive influence on the people who live in it.”

# EXPERIMENTS

Part of Wanders’ own positive influence on design has come in the form of experiments with material or production techniques. **THE KNOTTED CHAIR**, for instance, mates durability with delicacy. It is made from aramid rope (typically used in



military and aerospace applications) with a carbon fiber core soaked in epoxy resin so that each macramé seat becomes slightly different under the influence of gravity. Similarly, the **CROCHET SERIES** involved sewing together hand-knitted cotton panels over Styrofoam forms; the panels were subsequently infused with epoxy resin and the Styrofoam removed to create stiff seating and sculptural elements that nonetheless appear both featherweight and filigreed. In Wanders’ work, however, these material and process experiments always serve the concept rather than remaining ends in themselves. With Bertjan Pot, Wanders made the heavily textural yet spare *Carbon Chair* (imagine a bent plane of cross-hatching as if drawn by hand) from carbon, simply because it was the only way to do it.

“I have been called a material designer,” Wanders remarks. “In fact, I don’t care about material, per se. I’ll use new materials and technology if I need to, but I only need to if there’s something I can’t do without it. Even if you start with the material, you have to find a reason behind the choices. You see designers who want to do something different just because of the material, but things are not valid or important just because they are smart or difficult.” →





Or high-tech. In Wanders' opinion, man should operate the machine (whereas for decades now, the machine has been operating man). Today's technologies enable us to do things we once considered impossible, including going back to using our hands to make things. Wanders' vases and sculptures exemplify his hands-on approach—partly because the material can capture marks made by the human hand in a literal way, and partly because they enable him to create what was once considered an oxymoron: the unique mass-produced object. The exquisitely asymmetrical forms of his Airborne Snotty Vases are based on the microscopic mucus expelled when we sneeze, vastly enlarged and modeled in 3D on a computer. The vases preserve not just a simple sneeze but a handful of the forms that the discharge assumes when generated by people suffering from diseases of the sinus cavity: ozaena, coryza, pollinosis, sinusitis, and the ever-popular influenza.



Another playful element repeated through many of Wanders' pieces is a dream-like skewing of scale. On first look, one assumes that his **BIG SHADOW FLOOR LAMP**, the monolithic bells, and Calvin light are based on small objects that have been supersized like Alice in Wonderland. Not so, Wanders says: "Sometimes things don't have a scale. The Big Shadow doesn't; it isn't an enlargement of anything. For me, scale is one of those things that doesn't

have all that much meaning but is given meaning nonetheless." When new staff members arrive at the Marcel Wanders studio, it has become tradition that a miniature cardboard portrait is made of each. Wanders once suggested to Droog that he model the entire collection in tiny paper pieces. His **3D HAIKUS** are small Art Deco-looking tabletop vignettes of his own collections, in which men and floor lamps loom larger than cars. "It's a game that designers play all the time," Wanders insists. "There isn't an important story behind it; it's just what we do. One of the places I get my ideas is from failure and from misunderstanding drawings. Your mistakes lead you in a certain direction."

## OPTIMALISM: SIMPLICITY AND DECADENCE

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Some people would like to believe that Wanders flies, scribbled and curlicued in the sky—that he works in a frenzy of frills and eschews minimalism to cultivate ornate whimsy. After all, his use of texture and pattern is nothing if not exuberant.

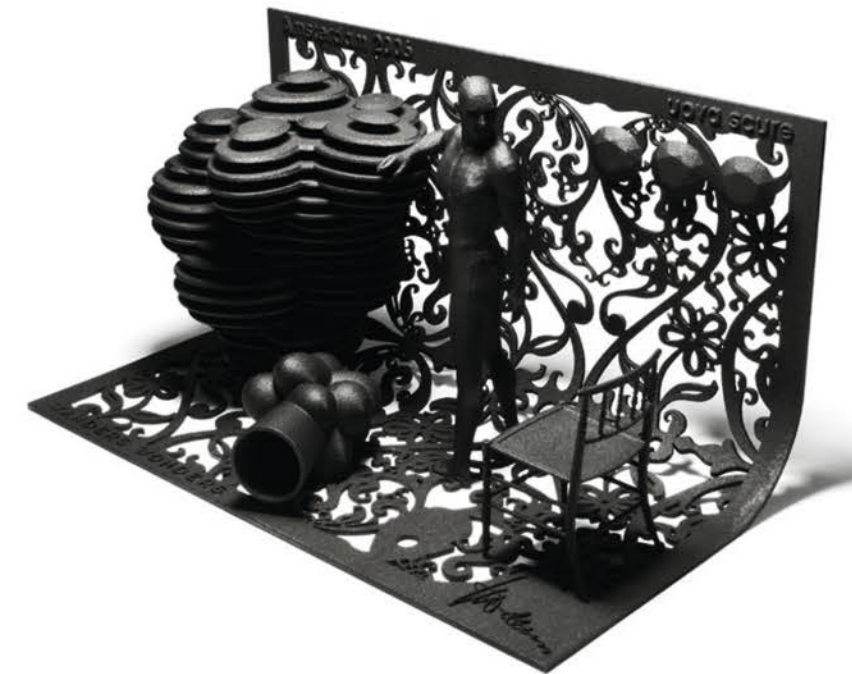
"I try not to be baroque. People sometimes use the word to describe my work, but I would never do so," the designer explains. "Today, though, we think that if there's a detail on a wall, it's overdecorated. We're so used to empty white spaces, but 200 years ago people thought a white room was a ruin."

It thus says a great deal that Wanders printed one of his **PATCHWORK PLATES** for Royal Tichelaar Makkum with the overleaf of Adolf Loos' 1908 essay *Ornament and Crime*. In this historically provocative pamphlet, Loos declared that "the evolution of culture marches with the elimination of ornament from useful objects," arguing that the use of ornament is degenerative, immoral, and even criminal. But Loos has been loosed upon himself: for the rest of the series, Wanders brought together historical plate patterns from RTM's long-standing collection with contemporary decorative elements to create modern hybrids that vaunted ornament. →



# FOR WANDERS, DESIGN MUST TELL A STORY, ELICIT A FEELING, AND ABSORB US.

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EVERY VASE,  
EVERY BRUSH  
STROKE,  
EACH INTERIOR  
NARRATES  
A TINY TALE.







Indeed, Marcel Wanders bounces gleefully on a fulcrum between the minimum and the maximum, between the naked plate and the prolific pattern, like a child on a newly made bed. Minimalist? Opulent? Both, Wanders' work sings: a faucet for Boffi is both austere and floral, cool and quilted. Without our realizing it, Wanders has become a harbinger of the fresh synthesis that has been drawing us into the new millennium. This rigorous decoration is omni-

present in his interiors for restaurants, like **THOR** in New York's Hotel on Rivington, where guests enter through a foyer that is a gargantuan imitation of his Egg Vase, or the 2005 Lute Suites. Is it mere styling? "What I do in a decorative language is very, very little," he insists. "I make things like wallpaper that are only decorative, but I also design the walls, the skin of space. I can choose things to do with decoration very precisely." The union of old and new, ornamental and bare happens in his **ZEPPELIN LIGHT** from Flos, which has a romantic quality, but is a very minimal object. Its structure recalls antique decorative chandeliers, but is wrapped in a cobweb of material that muffles that detail. With the classical aesthetic implied, its form calls an entire bygone world to mind.

This is typical Wanders: a cataclysm of contradictions. When he buys old tables and desks from flea markets in Amsterdam and paints them a single color, updating them in one casual gesture for use in the studio, or when he creates his **NEW ANTIQUES**, he mixes old and new metaphors, renewing the spirit of well-loved objects and prolonging the lives of



good ideas. In this way, he satisfies our wish for the modern and the lean while giving us pieces that have the capacity to mature. It is possible, as Wanders puts it, to have a long-lasting relationship with his products.

## PERSONAL EDITIONS: WRITING THE NEW RULES OF DESIGN



Today, Wanders has begun to design spaces—not just atmospheres, but interiors on a gargantuan scale. The lush **VILLA MODA** department store in Bahrain and the Mondrian Hotel in Miami, Florida, will be followed by two more Mondrians, including one in Las Vegas. These environments are not just collations of his objects but evolutions of them. And as Wanders becomes increasingly influential, it is important to understand the roots of his work, which were spelled out in the Milan exhibition entitled Personal Editions. →





The show celebrated the man in the machine and the art that can be injected into industry by presenting work that was both mass-produced and crafted by hand. It featured series like the **ONE-MINUTE SCULPTURES**, on which the actions of Wanders' fingers were captured in clay and gold luster, as well as One-Minute Delftware, statuettes and vases fired in bare white porcelain, as if nude, and then hand-painted by Wanders with great expressive swathes of glaze, each stroke of the brush articulated and explicit on the surface. His Crochet furniture, solid armchairs and stools, which look as insubstantial as doilies, were showcased alongside the Pizzo Carrara credenza, the sandblasted surface of which has the delicacy of Crochet but is made of heavy marble rather than cotton. Also on show were his densely graphical magnesium etches, renewing an old art form by representing interleaved, non-linear narratives instead of single, straightforward images; and Calvin, his room-sized lamp with a shade that mimics cake-like layers of women's crinolines.

With **PERSONAL EDITIONS**, Wanders demonstrates how design has changed. He wants us to remember that man must work the machine, that art fuels industry, and that ordinary life is actually quite extraordinary. Like many of his interiors for hotels and restaurants, Wanders' products, environments, and events seem to float somewhere between dream and reality: Look! There's a family of rabbits in the house. And if you turn the lights low enough, patterns woven into the carpet will take root and blossom, or a fisherman's net will obstinately ignore the laws of physics to rise from the floor by itself into the shape of an armchair.

"I don't have a lot of strict rules about myself. I have different sides and it's hard sometimes to understand that they are one person," Wanders says. "I'm larger than my rules—and I feel happy with that."

Wanders is telling us that it's alright to believe in breaking the rules, alright to abandon the cubicles of our workday lives—and then he shows us the door and turns the key in the lock until we can hear the bolt drawn back...

(Opposite)

**ONE MINUTE SCULPTURE**  
Marcel Wanders / Personal Editions

Decorative objects in clay and gold luster or black glaze created as time-constrained design exercises by Wanders.

"We worked on industrialization for the last 150 years. Today, technology is so well organized and sophisticated that the products are almost perfect, sometimes deadly perfect. Perfection cannot take us any further; we need life in our environment."

