

Tichelaar Makkum - In Tradition and Presence

-Vibe Overgaard, Gerrit Rietveld Academie 2009

Introduction:

Tichelaar Makkum is the oldest existing company in the Netherlands, founded in 1594. It is also the last remaining Dutch factory to concentrate on handmade ceramics in a traditional production process.

The company has all along been in the hands of the Tichelaar family and today it's run by Jan Tichelaar, who represents the 13th link of the Tichelaar generation. Tichelaar means "Tile-maker".

The Tichelaar factory is situated in the Dutch city Makkum by the lake Ijsselmeer in the Northern province Friesland.

In the beginning the company focused on the production of tiles and bricks. After 1670 domestic pottery has been the core business.

Tradition:

Tichelaar Makkum's success is based on its appreciation of tradition. The long history of this company enables it to have the right knowledge and competence to work with a traditional production process.

The clay that is used for the pottery is called Frisian clay. It is dug up locally in the city of Makkum.

Earthenware is the kind of pottery that is glazed in a way so it can resist liquids. For this kind of pottery Tichelaar Makkum uses a very old traditional technique called "majolica". The local clay is being formed and burned in the oven. Following it is being covered with white tin glazing on which the decorations are painted and the pottery is burned again. It is all done by hand. Tichelaar Makkum uses this traditional technique all though it has basically vanished from the pottery industry.

In the Tichelaar products you will find the traditional Dutch patterns and motifs such as ships, flowers, windmills and animals.

Innovation:



Traditional Tichelaar plate

In 1920 Tichelaar stopped the development of new products and focused on the traditional pottery. Besides this the factory also made special costumed tiles for restoration of old historic Dutch houses. When Jan Tichelaar in 1990 took over the direction of the company it was in economical crises. His job was now to focus on the process of innovation to save the company.

“You could find a huge number of cheap copies of our products and they were regarded as tourist souvenirs. Since 1980 we had been in a difficult situation, that made it necessary for us to redefine our goals, to be able to survive as the oldest existing company in the Netherlands.”¹

To realize the new strategy the factory went through a total reconstruction and today it is a flexible production with 72 employees and a yearly turnover approaching 5 million €.

One of the most important parts of this new strategy is the cooperation with modern designers. Among these Hella Jongerius, Alexander Van Slobbe and Dick Van Hoff can be mentioned.

Sticking to traditional values:

Redefining the main goals of The Royal Tichelaar Makkum factory hasn't been a fast and easy process. One of the most difficult things has been to make the employees understand what its all about and why it is necessary. This skepticism of renewal might exist because of the factory's long history as a local cultural symbol in Makkum. It has become a part of the folklore in the community and the sticking to traditions is a part of the mentality that lives in the Tichelaar factory.

But in the work with contemporary design Tichelaar has not intended to forget the values of the traditional Dutch pottery-making and would never move any parts of the production to an eastern country like so many other design companies has done:

“It is crucial to keep the production in the Netherlands. Ceramics is a difficult discipline to master and here in Makkum we have the craftsmanship-traditions, that means everything, when it comes to uncompromising demands to quality.”²

When Tichelaar chooses designers to work with it is very important that the designer has a great respect for the traditional Tichelaar Makkum values.

¹ Interview with Jan Tichelaar by Anne-Marie Gregersen, FOKUS nr.4, 2008

² Interview with Jan Tichelaar by Anne-Marie Gregersen, FOKUS nr.4, 2008

According to Jan Tichelaar the traditional design and the modern design in the Tichelaar collection compliments each other:

“With the unique modern design we are distancing our brand from the many copies of the traditional collection that you can find in the souvenir-shops. On the other hand the traditional collection creates a rich historic contexts for the new design-products.”³

An example of one of these modern design collection created by the Tichelaar Makkum in cooperation with modern designers is “the Pyramids of Makkum” exhibited in Milan during the fashion week 2008. The Tichelaar Makkum was doing a project for the Rijksmuseum, restoring 17th century flower pyramids. This became the inspiration of a series of modern pyramids each designed by a different Dutch designer.



Pyramide by Alexander van Slobbe

The fascination?

When I think about the story of Royal Tichelaar Makkum I can't help but wonder: Where does the fascination of the handmade aspect come from? Because of the slow and difficult production process, the prices of Tichelaar porcelain are very high, but people willingly pay for it.

It makes me curious to think about what it is that makes us want these expensive, not efficiently produced objects, when human kind, through the past centuries, have spent so much effort creating an industry that is as productive and efficient as possible.

In the architecture world there has also been an interest in the Royal Tichelaar Makkum. For Example Tichelaar produced a certain kind of tiles for a residential building in Amsterdam. The Tichelaar Laboratory produced 20 samples. Some of the samples went wrong

³ Interview with Jan Tichelaar by Anne-Marie Gregersen, FOKUS nr.4, 2008

and the glazing shrunk and revealed the clay underneath.

These samples were presented to the architects who liked them so much that they ended up becoming a part of the project. Here it becomes clear that these handmade tiles are used to give the building a unique touch instead of the look of mass-production. “Mass production is not necessarily what they want, particularly when the alternative offers a chance to obtain what nobody else has. We want unique things, because we want to be unique.”⁴



Building in Amsterdam and close up on tiles

Besides of the aspect of uniqueness, the element of history mixing with the contemporary is also very important when it comes to creating the special fascination of Tichelaar Makkum products. This became very clear to me as I did an interview with Cok De Rooy, owner of “The Frozen Fountain” which is a shop in Amsterdam selling Tichelaar products. Here I will give a summery of his words:

“The buyers of Tichelaar Makkum porcelain have a high interest in the historical context. And this is what Tichelaar is capable of integrating in a very excellent way. Even in their working with high fashion they manage to always integrate the awareness of history in their products.

Tichelaar has been excellent at choosing the right designers to work with. In the cooperation with these designers they basically created a miracle and managed to close the gap between the old collection and the present time. And even someone who is not well known in the world of design and porcelain production can recognize this.

I would like to give an example of a piece that makes tradition, history and contemporary time melt together into one object;

“The Big White Pot” By Hella Jongerius. It is a very classical shape. It looks like something that could also have been made a thousand years ago. But when you look at it without thinking you really experience that it is contemporary. It is from the time and space that you are living in. There is nothing really special about it and you will find it hard to explain,

⁴ “Innovative tradition”, publication by Tichelaar Makkum 2005

but you will recognize yourself and your own time in this very classical piece of design. And this is what design is all about; it has got everything to do with the moment and it expresses the time you are living in and everything surrounding you.”

When I look at Tichelaar products I can recognize what Cok De Rooy is talking about; Tichelaar Makkum’s modern collection has this contemporary touch and still it offers you the grandiose of the history. This balance is very unique and it is the thing that makes it special enough for buyers to fall in love with it.



“Big White Pot” by Hella Jongorius

There is one more thing that I believe creates the fascination of Tichelaar products; Human kind has past the last many centuries spent a huge effort creating the most efficient way of production. Machines and techniques are all the time developed so that more things can be produced in a shorter amount of time and with less effort.

I think that we are having a counter-reaction to this industry that we have created and this is revealed in our fascination for something like Tichelaar Makkum Products.

In this counter-reaction we find great value in the fact that an object have been created on the base of a human beings concentration, devotion and skill. On Tichelaar product you find a signature of the designer and the number of minutes it took to create the piece. On some parts of the modern collection you find the fingerprint of the designer. I think this fingerprint says a lot. It underlines the value in the fact that the piece has not been created in a machine but in human hands, and this human being has put a part of his/her identity into it.

Conclusion:

Learning about the history of Tichelaar Makkum and realizing what it is that makes it special, has given me a new knowledge of the world of design and fashion; Design is important because it is the indicator of the fact that human beings are not careless towards the objects surrounding us. We care about beauty and esthetics and we like to put love and value into the surrounding world. That is why we appreciate a pot that is not only existing

in its function of carrying liquid but also gives us satisfaction in our need of esthetics. In my opinion this need is one of the things that really makes us human.

I also realized that fashion is not only about brands and market. Fashion is the attempt to realize what the essence of *the now* consists of. And I think this awareness of present time is important for us to focus on our existence in the moment. And Tichelaar goes a step further by using the history as an interesting contexts for the present time.

Sources:

Websites:

www.tichelaar.nl

<http://moderncraft.blogspot.com/2009/08/royal-tichelaar-makkum.html>

<http://www.themagazineantiques.com/news-opinion/discovery/0000-00-00/ceramics-by-royal-tichelaar-makkum/>

<http://www.wallpaper.com/interiors/tichelaar-makkum-towers/2330>

Articles:

“Innovative Tradition”, publication by Tichelaar Makkum 2005

“The Uncompromising Ceramics-producer of the Netherlands” Interview with Jan Tichelaar by Anne-Marie Gregersen, FOKUS nr.4, 2008

Books:

“Tichelaar Makkum 1700-1867”, Peiter Jan Tichelaar, Primavera, 2004

