

In the fashion world, the designation ‘haute couture’, established in Paris century ago, is the highest achievable indication of quality. But is the term still relevant and applicable in Dutch fashion today? Or is it time we asked ourselves what we mean by ‘excellent’?

Text by: Elsbeth Grievink

For years, haute couture has stood for craftsmanship, for a designer’s ultimate creative excesses, for the *crème de la crème* – for a world accessible only to a lucky few. But, as the semiotician, brand and strategy consultant and independent fashion curator Luca Marchetti warned, we mustn’t become obsessed with it. Quality takes many forms; haute couture is only one. He was speaking to an audience of fashion professionals, students and aficionados at Premesela’s Evolving Excellence forum on the 23rd of April 2010 in The Hague. Subject for the day: how to identify high quality in fashion.

Grandeur versus concept

Marchetti’s remark raises questions. For instance, which forms of quality exist in fashion? From which qualities do Dutch designers derive their identity? And are these valued highly enough?

For Marchetti, haute couture is closely linked to its place of origin – it is “a matter of *terroir*.” Haute couture, an invention of the Paris fashion scene, is historically and socially tied to that city, just as champagne is to the region that gave it its name. Haute couture, Marchetti said, stands for a certain *grandeur*, for spectacle. The word *grandeur* – which certainly stretches the concept of quality – is characteristically French. A thing’s value depends on social factors, Marchetti argued. If the values deemed important by two cultures differ, so will their perceptions of quality.

Dutch design’s quality is located on the conceptual plane; the Netherlands is celebrated for it around the world. Designers like Viktor & Rolf as well as newcomers like Claes Iversen include a critical note in their collections and shows. Think of *Le Parfum*, the odourless scent Viktor & Rolf created to bring the industry to its senses and encourage fashion’s integration as an art form. Designers are increasingly sending the message through their work: Pay attention, the world is changing.

“I see in Dutch design that notions like affect, cosiness, warmth, and a specific notion of domesticity based on the previous characteristics [are] important,” Marchetti said at the forum. “Maybe these notions have a higher weight in Dutch than *grandeur* has in France. These could be the elements defining a new or future standard of excellence.”

Charting our own course

The Netherlands is progressive in the sphere of technology. As a project manager at V2_, Piem Wirtz works with wearable technology. While the technology itself is not especially geared to wearability, such work shows what new technology can mean to our lives. Wirtz's goal is to let art inspire industry and vice versa – to move fashion forward. The innovative character of Dutch design should be more widely recognised, she says. "Dutch design often looks very plain and simple, but it always has a twist that makes you look twice."

It is clear that the work of Dutch designers is deserving of the label 'high quality'. It is also clear that its quality is determined by values not covered by the term 'haute couture'. According to fashion curator José Teunissen, "We're on the verge of a change. More and more people are starting to think about quality of life. It's time to define a new sense of quality. We should be proud of our artistic designers and think about how we can encourage them."

How, then, should we identify this form of quality? According to Marchetti, we must begin by looking at the urgent matters of the day: the democratisation of design, sustainability and globalisation. We should chart our own course in our work and not concern ourselves with the French system and dominant notions of what quality is or should be.

Tomatoes, tomahtoes

"What's going on in Dutch cuisine is that you use the French basics and mix them, combine them, with what we have in Holland, our fish, our vegetables, and also our cultural heritage," Edwin Severijn said at the forum. The head chef of the travelling restaurant Sot-l'y-laisse noted a parallel between the culinary and fashion worlds. More and more Dutch people have basic knowledge of French cooking, which is thus becoming part of their daily lives, he said. They buy nice cookbooks, read about products, learn to recognise quality, and pay to dine in good restaurants. The same should happen in fashion, Severijn argued. It is the academies' job to raise quality onto a higher level, he said: trainee chefs usually have a good command of skills but lack essential knowledge of their ingredients.

Fashion designer Jan Taminiau agrees. Just as chefs taste ingredients, a designer feels materials, he said during the forum. Only by knowing one's ingredients well can one prepare an exquisite dish. A supermarket sun-dried tomato probably didn't come from the Italian countryside, he pointed out, as much as we'd like to believe it did – but if you've never tasted an Italian one, you won't know the difference.

Maaïke Feitsma, who studies Dutch fashion since the 1960s, says the answer lies in making conscious choices. "Whether it's a couture or off-the-rack piece, a regular tomato or an organic one, if you think about what you're buying and make conscious decisions, differences will automatically stand out. The problem is

probably down to the fact that consumption has become a goal in itself; the emphasis is no longer on what you're actually consuming."

An urge to experiment

What can Dutch designers do to showcase their own quality? Jan Taminiau says he has to show at Paris Fashion Week because he can converse with like-minded experts there. "The people who love the couture world [assemble in one place], and you can have a discussion," he says, pointing out that while much is possible online, fashion must be seen and touched. At the forum, Taminiau showed a film of seamstresses sewing coin-sized sequins onto silk in his atelier. This painstaking way of working contrasts with that of Gerrit Uittenbogaard, of the design duo G+N, whose successful Gluejeans are glued rather than sewn together. "For me, it's not the material but the idea that's primary," Uittenbogaard says. "As a designer, you have to determine your position. We want to make a statement, show what's possible within the limits of fashion. That doesn't stop with the product. For me, it's the combination of factors that determines quality. You don't get there with a good idea and nice execution. Presentation, communication and marketing are at least as important." G+N paid great attention to the positioning of its collection, he says. "We have the image of the big denim brands' cheeky little brother. Gluejeans are a high-grade product that's made in the Netherlands, largely by hand. That, as well as the fact that we work outside the seasons, don't allow ourselves to be pushed around by the fashion system and aren't available everywhere, gives us exclusivity. We keep provoking the consumer."

Uittenbogaard says Dutch designers waver between couture and prêt-à-porter. "They all want to work in the most experimental and avant-garde way possible, but they're still a bit behind with respect to execution and techniques."

His argument is more evidence of Dutch designers' independent-minded attitude to their field. They refuse to be forced to think in terms of pigeonholes like haute couture and prêt-à-porter. They don't limit themselves to either classic craft or pure innovation.

José Teunissen says, "The advantage of Dutch designers is, they aren't hampered by tradition. That means they're flexible and able to change with the world. It means they don't rigidly cling to a fixed system but easily get involved in new phenomena, like blogging."

The power of Dutch designers lies in the way they make creative connections between different areas and create space for experimentation. The challenge lies in making the most of that power. Piem Wirtz says, "Opportunity lies precisely in combining old crafts with new technologies. In fact, one can't exist without the other. Weaving with high-tech fibres – that's when things get interesting."