



Dutch designer Marcel Wanders. AFP photo

Dutch design star Marcel Wanders: ‘I love making my work, but I make it to connect to others’

Selina Denman
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Marcel Wanders has been likened to Lady Gaga. There’s the same element of experimentation, perhaps, and the sense that both function on a separate plane to the rest of us – but how does the Dutch design star feel about being compared to the wackiest woman in music?

“If people want to compare me to someone like her, I suppose that is fine. I think in a way we are similar – breaking new ground, experimenting and challenging expectations, and pushing boundaries. I think all artists do that to some degree. We see something that can be improved, reimagined and redefined to touch people on a visceral level. I think she does that. There is a theatrical sense to what she brings to her performance, and it reflects some of what I have been able to do with regards to immersing people in a continual state of surprise. My goal is to offer multilayered, sensory experiences to people all over the world.”

This drive to push boundaries has been getting Wanders into trouble since he was a young man. Born in Boxtel in the Netherlands in 1963, Wanders started his design education at the Eindhoven Design Academy – but was promptly expelled. “I didn’t necessarily agree with what

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my teachers felt was right or wrong in design," he explains. "I wanted to ask as many questions as possible, so I directed myself towards experimentation, allowing for a lot of mistakes, to explore creativity as widely as possible and risk failure, while aiming for an excellent end result. That wish to experiment was considered rebellious, and it got me expelled. Since then, the same drive (to do something I haven't done before and experiment) has stayed very strong. In 2015, I completed an MBA at Insead. I never want to be entirely comfortable with what I'm doing or where I'm going. As a designer, to me, I never truly arrive. Arrival is exciting if inspired by new beginnings."

Wanders opened his eponymous studio in Amsterdam in 1995 and credits the city for playing a part in his success. "I think what sets me apart as a designer is my unwavering search to surprise. I believe it comes from the creative, open-minded and imaginative environment I am surrounded by in Amsterdam."

It was in 1996, with the launch of his now-iconic Knotted Chair, that Wanders first garnered international fame. Since then, he has become one of the most prolific designers in the world, with over 1,700 projects to his name, covering the full gamut of design, from chairs, tables, lighting, tableware and accessories, to electronics, jewellery, and residential, retail and hotel interiors. He has worked with every company worth its design salt, including Alessi, Capellini, Christofle, Kartell, Louis Vuitton, Puma and Swarovski.

Wanders was in Dubai this week, making his Design Days Dubai debut – he presented the fair's keynote speech and is showcasing limited-edition pieces from his Personal Editions line. These include the intricate Bon Bon Chair and Gold Blossom lamp, which combine traditional crafts and industrial processes; the famous Knotted Chair; the delicate-looking Fragile Fingers, which Wanders describes as "ceramic expressions of humanity and hope"; the hand-painted Delft Blue Plates and Delft Blue Vases; and an exquisitely designed, entirely handcrafted art edition of Rijks, Masters of the Golden Age, an oversized book that pays homage to the 17th-century Dutch masterpieces from the Rijksmuseum's prestigious Gallery of Honour.

While Wanders is a regular visitor to Dubai, he is particularly excited by the opportunity to connect with a new audience on a larger scale. "I love making my work, but I make it to connect to others. On a desert island I would not sharpen my pencil. At Design Days Dubai I expect to introduce my work to a sophisticated and interested audience. As an artist you can't ask for more.

"I am quite familiar with Dubai and its design scene. I have been a regular visitor for more than 10 years. It is hard to name an area where hospitality, friendship, culture, ambition and beauty are so highly regarded."

Wanders' approach to his work is philosophical, emotionally driven and, above all, human-centric. One need only ask for his definition of great design to see that he doesn't take his calling lightly. "Great design is so many things all at the same time. It is emotional, functional and responsive. It creates an unwritten dialogue, a connection, between itself and those who experience it. It is open to interpretation, yet created for a specific purpose. It creates meaning and value. The very best design, I feel, is that which resonates so deeply that people can't help but discover something within themselves when they see it. Luxury starts where functionality ends and where the true value is personal and so has no price or reason," he says.

Beyond his ability to surprise, it is Wanders' willingness to show vulnerability that most sets him apart, he adds. "I think what makes me different is that ... I am comfortable with expressing my vulnerability. I think designers often want to just put the loveable ideas out there. Ones that are

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imaginative but not very introspective. It is more rare for a designer to explore his or her disappointments and moments of disillusion and doubt. Yet, all creative people have these moments. I am comfortable enough to admit flaws and emotions, which allows me to be more intimate and to create authentic objects."

I ask Wanders whether there is anything that he hasn't designed yet but would like to – and it is a sign of his breadth and versatility that he cites two very different things: a mosque and an opera. "With the various cultures opening up to the world, intercultural co-creation, cultural exchange and respect is much more important than it was a few years ago and something that challenges us as a society – to find ways to show the respect we have for each other is of existential importance. One of the ways I would love to do this is by designing a mosque. As a westerner, I'd love to pay tribute to the thoughts and visions of other people and to give them – in a very respectful and human way – a space that is meaningful. And if there is one other project I am looking forward to, it is the creation of an opera. I foresee the magic of that theatrical capacity to lead me to new exciting territories. I am waiting for the day that the Met in New York gives me that call."

There's no denying that Marcel Wanders is one of the design world's greats. And although he is prolific, he gives the impression that he still cares deeply about what he does, and about the wider significance of design. So how, then, does he define success?

"Success for me isn't being known as much as it is being known as someone who loves what he does every day. I would say that I can measure my success by my satisfaction in my work and the relationships I have developed over the years. I have reached a point where what I work on is just as important as who I work with. And we have amazingly creative people in the studio. Therefore, if I am finding joy in the process and in the collaboration as well as the end result, then I am successful."

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