Source: International Herald Tribune {Main}
Edition:
Country: UK
Date: Monday 13, July 2009
Page: 10
Area: 1040 sq. cm
Circulation: Pub Stmt 242073 Daily
BRAD info: page rate £56,189.36, scc rate £15.24
Phone: 020 7836 4802
Keyword: V&A

Honoring heady days of 'design-art'

Culture

LONDON

Furniture show favors self-expression over mass appeal and functionality

BY ALICE RAWSTHORN

It's quite a wardrobe. One door sports the scene from Ovid's Metamorphoses in which the god, Apollo, watches the satyr, Marysas, being flayed alive. The other door shows Apollo pursuing the nymph, Daphne. The wardrobe was made in Paris in 1700 from gilded bronze with turtle shell and brass marquetry by André-Charles Boulle, the finest furniture maker of his day.

Now exhibited at the Wallace Collection in London, Boulle's wardrobe was the inspiration for a newer piece, which stands a few miles away at the Victoria & Albert Museum. The Robber Baron cabinet was conceived in 2006 by the Dutch designers Job Smeets and Nynke Tynagel of Studio Job and took a year to make from cast bronze. It replicates the shape of Boulle's design, but is decorated with state-of-the-art fighter jets, missiles, machine guns and other latter-day symbols of power. A beautifully crafted black hole bursts through its doors, as if something had exploded inside.

The Robber Baron cabinet is one of 50 intricately made, richly symbolic objects in "Telling Tales: Fantasy and Fear in Contemporary Design," an exhibition opening Tuesday at the V&A. It is one of the most ornate pieces in the show, but has stiff competition. Take the Fig Leaf wardrobe designed by a fellow Dutchman, Tord Boontje, and clad in 616 hand-painted copper "leaves," each side of which took a master enameler six hours to paint. Or the Honeycomb Vase, designed by a Slovakian, Tomas Gabzdil Libertiny, and "made" by 40,000 bees, which added layer after layer of beeswax on to the mould of a vase he placed in their hive.

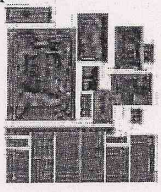
Almost all of the objects in "Telling Tales" conform to the conventional definition of design by fulfilling a practical function, though not very well. You could hang your clothes in Mr. Boontje's creation on the patinated bronze "tree" made by a 159-year-old French artisanal metal workshop, but they would be better off in a cheap IKEA wardrobe. Like most of pieces in this exhibition, it was conceived not to be useful, but as a means of self-expression.

Ignoring the modernist goal of designing decent products for as many people as possible at the lowest possible prices, the "Telling Tales" designers were similarly self-indulgent when it came to the production of their work, often a lengthy process involving precious materials, ancient skills and elaborate techniques. "We felt it would be timely and topical to do a show of the generation of designers making limited editions and unique pieces, which are about narrative," said Gareth Williams, the exhibition's curator.

Narrative is not new in design. If you look back historically, every example of truly great design has something to say. Expressiveness is one of the qualities that distinguishes it from mere good design. The steely elegance of Marcel Breuer's 1920s metal furniture speaks volumes about the optimism of the 1920s, just as Verner Panton's S-shaped signature chair captures the excitement of the 1960s space race. And Apple's sleek iPhone reflects our zest for technology today.

All of these industrial objects say something about their own time, as do a few pieces in "Telling Tales," notably Julia Lohmann's ingenious Cow benches made in the shapes of cow's backs and upholstered in cow's hide to remind us of the animals that were killed to make them. But most of the exhibits favor historical references. The ornate tulip vases designed by Hella Jongerius, Jurgen Bey and other Dutch designers for the ceramics company Royal Tichelaar Makkum were inspired by late 17th century Delftware ornaments. Another Dutchman, Joris Laarman, cast a radiator in rococo swirls of concrete, and his studiomate, Jeroen Verhoeven, conceived the Cinderella Table in the curvaceous forms of 18th century French commodes.

There are some lovely and intriguing pieces in this show, but it also strikes a nostalgic note. All of the exhibits predate the credit crunch, and reflect a lighter, more playful era. The Robber Baron



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cabinet pokes fun at the billionaires who might buy it, and the Fig Leaf wardrobe evokes fairy tale romanticism. Mr. Williams added the word "fear" to the subtitle after the recession struck, but much of the most recent narrative-rich work has been darker and more distopian than "Telling Tales."

Equally dramatic has been the change in the economics of this area of design. Most of the exhibits were made in the confident expectation of being sold to the ingénue design collectors buying limited editions of furniture or "design-art" as the auction houses cheerfully rebranded it. Those collectors have disappeared during the recession. The Design Miami/Basel design fair in Switzerland last month was subdued. Some galleries have closed, and a bitter row has clouded the departure of Gijs Bakker from Droog, the Dutch design group that he co-founded and that lifted the careers of many of the "Telling Tales" designers.

Ambivalent though Mr. Williams is about design-art (as are many of his peers), the exhibition features some of the best examples. He writes an excellent analysis of the market's rise in the catalog, as well as charting the changes in design culture that fueled the recent explosion of self-expression. But the bleak truth is that designers will find it harder to persuade galleries and manufacturers to bankroll such expensive work, until the market revives.

"Telling Tales" can be read as an obituary for the heady early days of "design-art," although, with luck, it might also lead to useful redefinitions. Should the most fantastical exhibits be dubbed "design" or "decorative art?" Gallerists and auction houses opted for the former because the latter sounded old-fashioned, but "decorative art" may be a more accurate description for designers like Studio Job, who reference it historically and draw on its materials and techniques.

"If you think of some of the objects in this exhibition as a comment on industrial design, they don't work at all," Mr. Williams said.

"Perhaps the term decorative art does need to be explored again, and would be better than the indistinct and slippery term, design-art."

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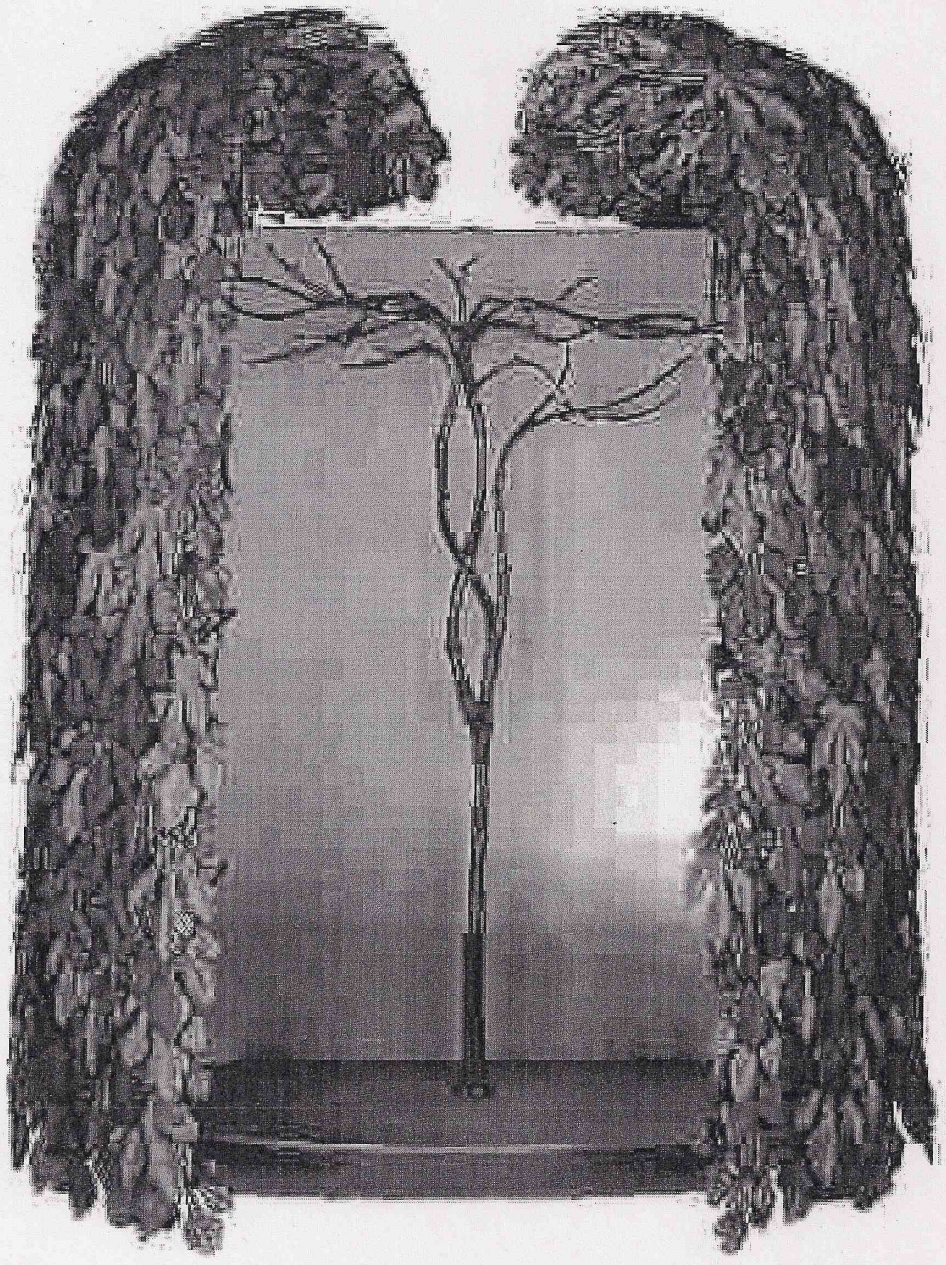

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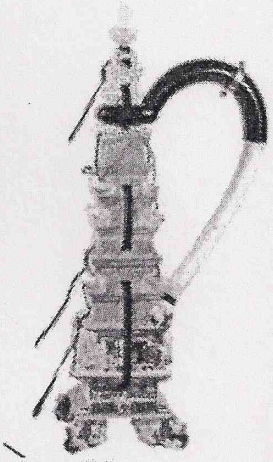
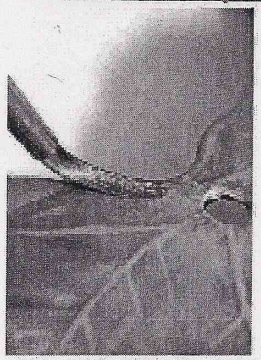


Above and left, Tord Boontje's Fig Leaf wardrobe, clad in 616 hand-painted copper leaves. Each side took an enameler about six hours to paint. The wardrobe, designed before the financial crisis, represents a more playful time, with a look denoting fairy tale romanticism.

STUDIO JOB



STUDIO MARTEN AURES/ ROYAL TICHELAAR MAKKUM

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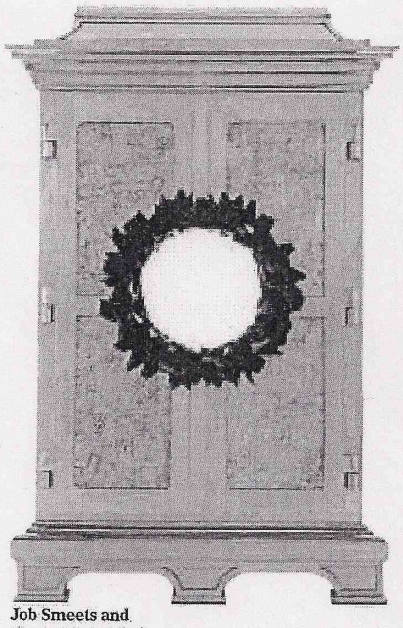
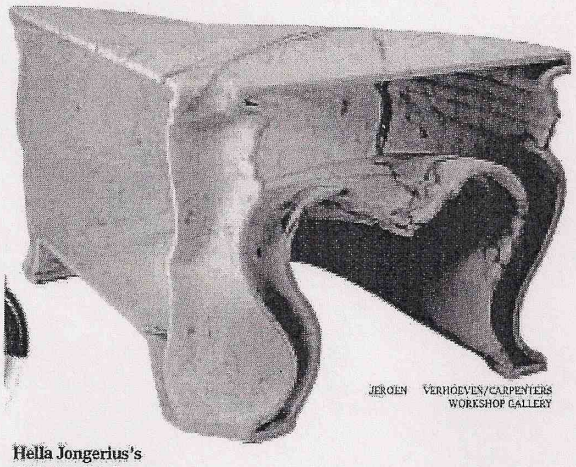


Job Smeets and Nynke Tynagel of Studio Job made the Robber Baron cabinet, left, from cast bronze. It is decorated with fighter jets, machine guns and other modern symbols of power.



JEROEN VERHOEVEN/CARPENTERS WORKSHOP GALLERY

Hella Jongerius's Tulip Vase, left, was inspired by 17th century Delftware ornaments, and Jeroen Verhoeven's Cinderella Table copies the curves of 18th century French commodes.