innovative tradition

On the one hand today's design is united with its ancestors, and on the other new life is brought to age-old craftsmanship.

If there is such a thing as 'the dialectics of progress', meaning that having a head start can slow you down, could it be that the opposite is also possible, giving rise to 'the dialectics of lost ground'?

It would seem that way, as designers increasingly look to traditional craftsmanship for inspiration. And although traditional companies are working with designers not nearly as often, in the North of the Netherlands, amongst the windmills and behind the dikes, the past and the present are linked more than ever before. The centuries-old ceramics company Koninklijke (Royal) Tichelaar Makkum (KTM) manufactures its products in a traditional yet innovative manner.

In light of its impressive past, it is impossible not to say a few things about the history of the company. It is the oldest existing company in the Netherlands, founded in 1594. Four hundred years later KTM is still working in the same manner, using the local Frisian clay to produce earthenware and ornamental ceramics. However, it is not its traditional earthenware that has drawn attention to the company in recent years, but the way KTM is working together with contemporary designers: on the one hand today's design is united with its ancestors, and on the other new life is brought to age-old craftsmanship.

In order for the old craftsmanship to endure, innovation is indispensable. Many Dutch companies relying mainly on traditional craftsmanship seem destined to vanish. And although individual artisans manage to survive, entire industries, such as the glass, tin and textile industries, have been wiped out. One might say time has caught up with them. Fortunately, however, times are changing, and in recent years there has been a growing interest in traditional techniques all over the world. Companies that are able to respond to new developments manage to turn the tide.

In the 1970s there was a similar rekindling of the love for craftsmanship. The natural outcome of this was a general embracing of creativity and a rejection of uniform industrial products. People started making their own products in a myriad of ways. Knitting was as popular then as it is again today. Beyond that, people began to decorate whatever they could lay their hands on around the house. Pieter Jan Tichelaar, KTM's director at the time, realized what was happening. He was approached by artists and ceramists, and was also looking for creative people himself. Thus the foundation was established for a number of cooperative projects.

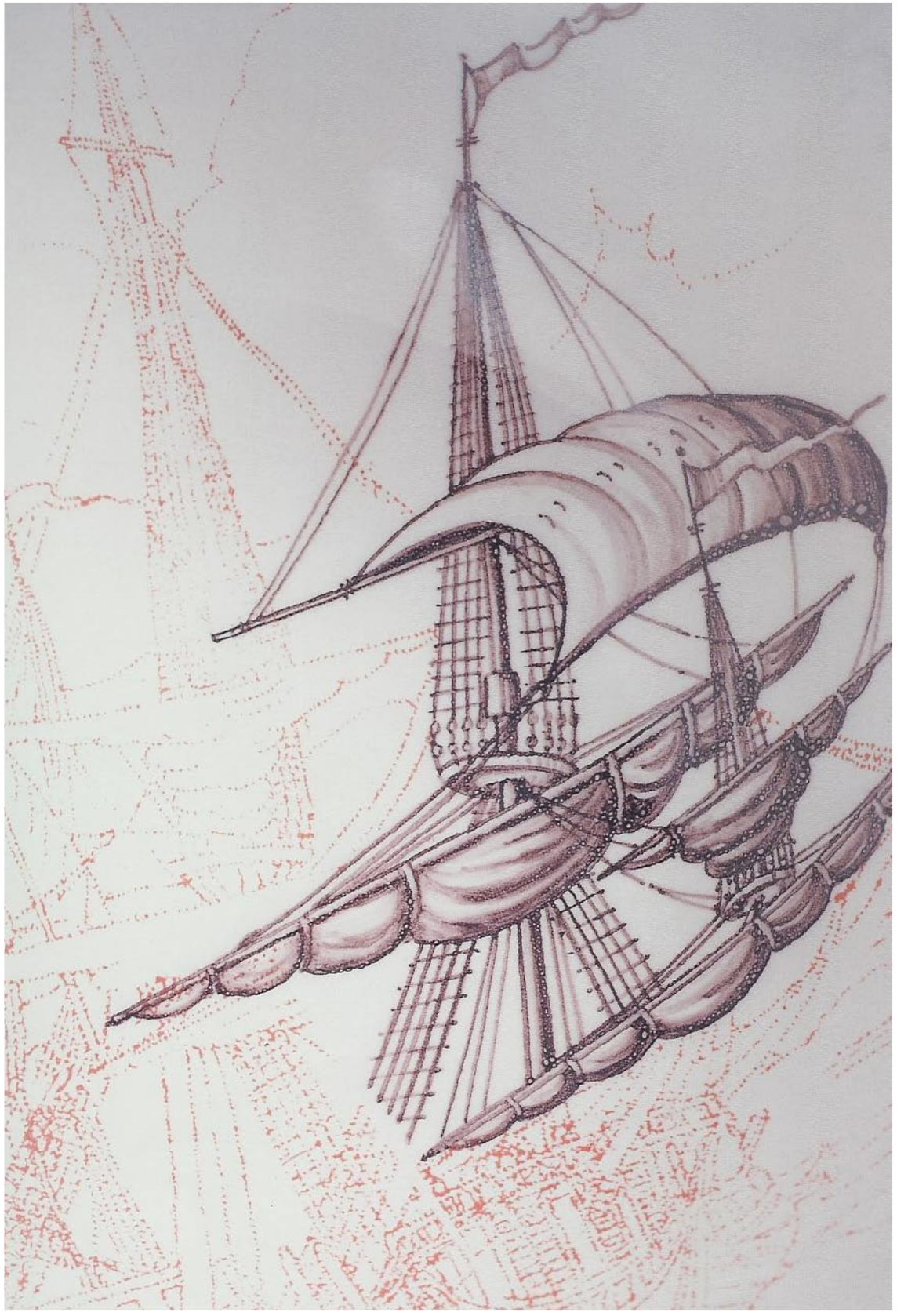
In the 1980s people lost interest in traditional craftsmanship. Everything had to be industrial, cool and businesslike, and all things that reeked of tradition were suspect. Like other companies of its kind, KTM felt the impact of these developments. During a difficult period Jan Tichelaar succeeded his father (and the twelve generations that had come before him) as company director. After numerous reorganizations he managed to turn the company from a supply-driven into an order-driven organization. This meant that the company could respond to market demand in an even more flexible way.

At about the same time Hella Jongerius approached KTM to see if the company wanted to produce her new B-set porcelain service. This had to be manufactured in porcelain, which up to then had been a process that was hard to manage for KTM, a company that worked predominantly with earthenware. Jongerius persisted, however. The idea was for the B-set to be manufactured in a somewhat uncontrollable fashion, to allow for the irregularities that characterize Jongerius' work.

[illegible] Karin Nussbaumer
@ P.M. Thomassen
[illegible] Marcel van Doorn @ Unit NL
[illegible] Bernardine Walrecht
[illegible]
Royal Tichelaar Makkum
(www.tichelaar.nl)

We want unique things, because we want to be unique.

JT seized this opportunity to introduce porcelain to the company, and thus far it has proven a successful choice. It is a clear example of product innovation, made possible by the demand of a designer and a manufacturer's ability to take a risk. Over time the cooperation between Jongerius and KTM developed further and a large part of her ceramic designs are now made by the company. There is also an increasing interest in the company from the field of architecture. In 1999, Ettore Sottsass asked for help in the production of a certain kind of tiles that were destined for the façade of a residential area in Singapore. KTM's research department went to work and produced a range of tiles in special colours that now adorn six villas. Architects increasingly find their way to KTM. They are well aware that traditional craftsmanship can offer the perfect solution to unique problems, unlike mass production, which does not allow for an individual approach. 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.

The products made by KTM cater to that demand. They are rare, handcrafted and striking and their creative success has resulted in presentations at the Salone del Mobile in Milan in 2003 and 2004. Thus far the company has collaborated at the Milan presentations with Marcel Wanders, Hella Jongerius, Jurgen Bey and Job Smeets, all of whom studied KTM's history in their own ways. Marcel Wanders made a series of randomly decorated plates, the Patchwork Plates. Using five existing plates and saucers from KTM's collection, he painted six different designs on each of them. The designs were made in a changing combination of transfers, hand-painted in part or entirely. The colours he used are partly connected to the well-known traditional designs. A fresh series of thirty different pieces was the result. Hella Jongerius designed a soup service set, including ladles. There is an inexpensive version, made with red transfers, as well as an exclusive version where the transfer design has been hand-painted in a traditional manganese colour. When all the pieces are placed in a certain order the pattern, a sailing vessel from KTM's archives, is fully visible. Jurgen Bey analyzed the company's production process and visualized the time spent on each individual part. Each of the pieces, from saucer to coffeepot, is named after the number of minutes it took to manufacture it. Bey made three versions of the tea service set. What is remarkable is that, much like the other two designers, he has tried to establish a price diversity. Finally, last year designer Job Smeets was invited to design several products. He reinterpreted a number of classic items in the company's collection: a sconce, a clock, a box, a jug and a piggybank. Each piece comes in three versions: one decorated in white, on with transfers and one hand-painted. With the hand-painted pieces he managed to use the traditional painting method in an entirely new way after a thorough investigation of the technique. The result is a combination of personal style, carried out in a traditional technique, which evolves into a modern technique in the process.

On May 1, 2005, KTM will open a new store near its Makkum-based plant. Here the entire KTM collection will be sold and displayed in a setting designed by Eveline Merckx and Jurgen Bey, in combination with various other products with a similar soul. The Makkumer earthenware will thus be shown in an ever-changing context. And of course, there will be another presentation in Milan next year. Who and what will be presented is a closely guarded secret, for the time being ...