



Hella Jongerius for KLM

Amsterdam
01 April 2013

This is the setting for the launch of Dutch designer Hella Jongerius' latest project, a redesigned interior for the business-class cabins of Dutch airline KLM. Commissioned in 2011, Jongerius has created new upholstery, curtains, carpets and blankets, as well as customising the seats used in the airline's planes; "Just about everything you can design without being an airplane engineer," she says by way of explanation. The first planes fitted with Jongerius' design, a fleet of long haul Boeing 747s, fly in July. But the design has already been unveiled and KLM wants to celebrate. Hence the Amsterdam warehouse.

Several hundred guests - KLM executives, customers, well-wishers and journalists - are all present in the warehouse. Blue spotlights settle on examples of Jongerius' work, music throbs and plinths are stocked with canapés, wine and juice. Complimentary pillows - each finished with a white ribbon - stand by the door and stewardesses slink past with trays of cocktails. This glitz is in stark contrast to the project it celebrates, as

well as the designer behind it.

Jongerius is an understated figure. She trained at Design Academy Eindhoven and, after graduating in 1993, founded her eponymous studio Jongeriuslab, which quickly became known for a fastidious attention to colour and texture. Jongerius focused her career on conceptual pieces, creating delicate textiles and furniture, and built up a body of work that was more concerned with the processes and intent behind design, than with turning out polished commercial products.

The 1993 *Soft Urn*, is a defining piece - an antique vase recreated in pliable polyurethane - as is the 1997 *B Set*, plain porcelain tableware fired at a low enough temperature to allow imperfections to enter each piece. Yet on stage in the Amsterdam warehouse the event's host coos phrases like "luxurious excellence" and "traditional luxury"; and the blonde man in the black suit settles into a mocked-up version of Jongerius' interior for an imagined flight to New York. It's a PR stunt. Very slick and very glamorous. And very un-Jongerius. "Are you enjoying the day?" I ask her. "It's part of the job," she responds.



The finished design for the KLM cabin IMAGE Marcus Gaab

But while the warehouse party may not reflect Jongerius, the KLM project does. Developed in conjunction with designers Edith van Berkel and Arian Brekveld, the plane's interior is quiet and thoughtful, a meticulously designed space filled with textiles woven in muted shades of blue, brown, grey, aubergine and white. Jongerius' previous work for

brands such as Vitra and Droog has infused industrial design with artisanal qualities, and interplay between craftsmanship and industrialisation is at the heart of much of her work.

The aeronautics industry therefore provides fertile ground for Jongerius to experiment; a world dominated by grey plastic, where design flourishes increase weight (and hence fuel costs) and standardisation is encouraged to allow for cheap, easy repairs in any airport. “It’s always nice to work in an extreme like aviation,” she says. “It’s easier to change an extreme industry. To put the first footstep in the snow is a pleasure; if you add one drop of red to an entirely blue world, you have something.”

Adding red to a blue world is an apt metaphor. KLM was founded in 1919, but it was not until 1971 that it introduced the defining element of its modern brand: the bright blue (or “crispy blue” as Jongerius calls it) signature colour that is daubed across the carrier’s planes, uniforms, website and corporate identity. Until Jongerius’ redesign, the colour also dominated the interiors of the carrier’s planes, although it has now been reduced to a highlight in a more restrained and diverse palette. “When KLM approached me, the first question they asked was what I thought of the blue,” she says. “I said it was very nice, but that it needed some company. I created a darker world to celebrate it. You can only use a colour that bright as a detail or signal colour.”

Jongerius’ use of accenting is most visible in the textiles she developed for the cabins. Working with the Dutch manufacturers such as Desso, Jongerius created new yarns and fabrics from scratch for the project. The interior’s carpet is a rich aubergine, picked out by a nebula-inspired pattern of grey fleck and KLM blue, the yarn for which was harvested from disused KLM steward uniforms and mixed with wool from Nordic mutton herds. The carpet’s colouration recurs throughout the interior, Jongerius’s crispy blue surfacing as small circles and thin lines in pillows, blankets and cabin class dividers, balanced out by swathes of elephant grey, purple browns and salmon pinks. The effect is homely, creating a palette far removed from the brand-friendly bright colours that blazon the cabins of carriers like Easyjet or Virgin Atlantic.



Jongerius worked with the the designers Edith van Berkel and Arian Brekveld to develop upholstery, curtains, carpets, blankets and a customised seats IMAGE Marcus Gaab

“I know a bit about colour and have a trained eye, but it was really difficult to get that right,” says Jongerius. “There are so many different light conditions in a plane: the light on the ground, the light in the clouds, the light above the clouds; sunlight, moonlight, artificial light.” While developing the palette Jongerius took carrying swatches of fabric with her when flying, scrutinising them throughout flights to see how they performed. “Colour is everything,” she says. “If you look at the world around you, your perception is defined by the colours you see. It can make or break a product.”

The emphasis on interior as product carried through to KLM. The airline’s collaboration with Jongerius is a commercial move intended to improve the commodity it deals in. “You can’t change the hardware of a plane, so what you’re selling to customers is the look and feel of your seats, fabrics and tableware,” says Erik Varwijk, KLM’s managing director. Jongerius is not the only designer to have collaborated with the brand: KLM has previously commissioned Dutch designers Marcel Wanders, Mart Visser and Viktor & Rolf to design tableware, uniforms and toiletry bags respectively for the airline. “We want to stress our own identity and Dutch design is a part of that,” says Varwijk. “All airlines are investing in their brands, so you have to make a difference somehow.”

Both KLM and Jongerius hope this difference will manifest as increased comfort for passengers. “Travel is difficult for everyone,” says Jongerius. “All the waiting time is horrible, exhausting. So the line to pursue as a designer is how you make that more comfortable.” This approach led Jongerius to consider KLM’s reclining seats. She was not originally

commissioned to work on the airline's seating, but as the project progressed Jongerius requested that her remit be expanded. "Every weak element in an interior has the capacity to ruin the whole," she says. "If you want to do something well, you've got to be involved in all the details. So I wanted the chair."



Jongerius worked to simplify the lines of an existing seat designed by B/E Aerospace IMAGE Marcus Gaab. The finished chair is a customised version of a standard model produced by the American company B/E Aerospace, a specialist aircraft interior manufacturer whose products are engineered to comply with the technical and logistical constraints of flight. Rather than develop an entirely new chair - "too expensive, too many new moulds" - Jongerius simplified the lines of the existing seat, introducing design interest through new materials such as leather and aluminum, and adding details such as shallow circular indentations on the seat dividers, a finish referencing the interior's textiles. "A lot of people had worked on the chair before I came to it, so there were a lot of different handwritings," says Jongerius. "We cleaned it up. If I had done it from scratch it would have looked very different, but I just focused on making the chair look more contemporary; more subtle and whispering."

Yet the main change Jongerius introduced was to personalise the chairs by upholstering them in different coloured fabrics. Individualisation is a

theme Jongerius has explored before. *B Set's* imperfections introduced individual character to industrially produced products and in 2002 Jongerius launched *Repeat* for Maharam, a fabric with long enough repeats (the distance between recurring elements in the pattern) to ensure that two pieces of furniture upholstered in the design would rarely overtly resemble one another. "It's so easy to just feel like a number," says Jongerius. "By introducing a little more individualisation it feels like there is more consideration for you as a consumer."

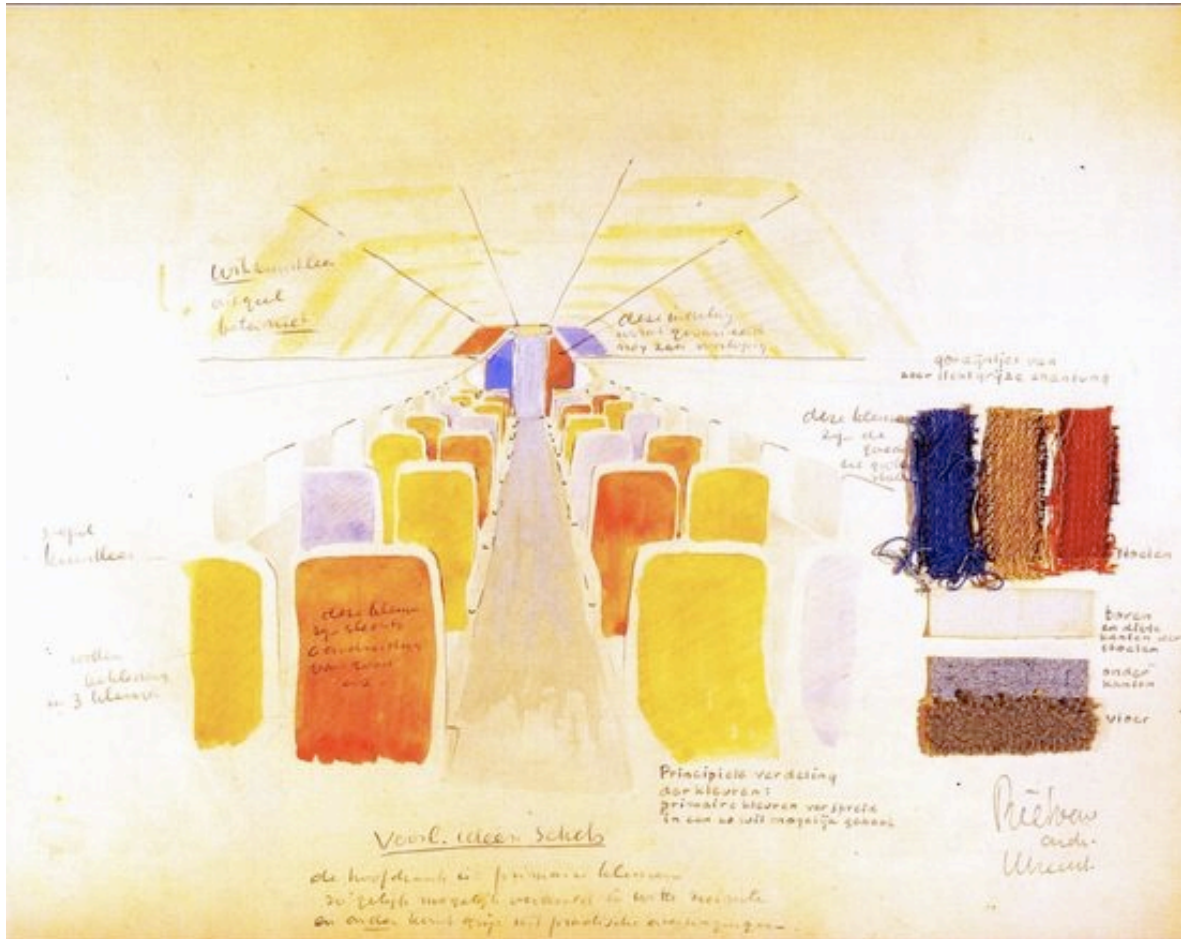


Jongerius' B-Set porcelain explored individualisation within an industrial context IMAGE Gerrit Schreurs

KLM will now expand the project by commissioning Jongerius to design interiors for the remainder of the airline's long-haul aircraft, as well as reimagining the airline's economy class cabins. "We will build on the language we've already developed and that's what I find interesting," says Jongerius. "You might look at this interior and think it's a small step for mankind, but it's actually really difficult to come so far on a project like this. Aeronautics is a very conservative industry. An airline's marketing team would never, ever do something with weaving or start working with yarns. I'm proud of what we accomplished."

It is an intriguing accomplishment. Jongerius has brought to bear her own design ethos on an industry that is rarely receptive to such things. In a world dominated by grey plastic, standardisation and

industrialisation, Jongerius has created an interior defined by her familiar themes of craftsmanship and individualisation. That she succeeded in doing so is all the more laudable considering those who have tried, and failed, before. While researching the project, Jongerius came across a sketch detailing an abandoned redesign of KLM's cabins proposed by the celebrated Dutch designer Gerrit Rietveld in the 1950s.



The sketch of Gerrit Rietveld's KLM interior that Jongerius discovered in the archive IMAGE KLM “He used such bright colours. Oranges, blues and yellows,” says Jongerius. Rietveld’s design is simpler than Jongerius’, employing stark calypso colouration instead of subtle patterning, but there are similarities nonetheless. Like Jongerius’ vision, Rietveld’s design introduced individually coloured chairs, with a strong focus on fabrics and atmosphere. “It was really radical - too radical to be accepted - but so interesting to see a designer working like that,” says Jongerius. “He was a genius. He pursued his own creative vision in a corporate setting.”

On stage in the warehouse the blonde man in the black suit climbs from his airplane seat to be met with applause and champagne: fictional flight KL 643 to New York is now ready to disembark. Watching this scene,

Jongerius's assessment of Rietveld's work becomes relevant to her own project as well. Like Rietveld's design, Jongerius' KLM interior finds creativity in the corporate world.