

**Bringing a touch of enchantment and sensuality to everyday objects, Tord Boontje melds traditional techniques with high-tech capabilities to create his luscious designs.**



At the Moroso showroom on Via Pontaccio, a minimal white entrance and an empty desk give nothing away. The words 'Happy Ever After' are emblazoned on a long drape. Behind them, a high-ceilinged room is filled with swings, benches and rocking chairs. Some are embroidered, others artfully draped with vivid blue, violet, green, orange and red fabrics. Panels of silk flutter from the ceilings; elsewhere banisters and objects are wrapped in huge felt

shawls with intense floral cut-out patterns. Lights are shrouded in metal flowers, casting playful and haunting shadows on the walls; shapes and colours are reflected in a large mirror at the back. There are unexpectedly childlike touches too: a bucket with hazelnuts near a table, glass bowls with embossed dragonflies at the bottom and a chair with Christmas bells hanging underneath the seat.

Tord Boontje, the creator of this starry, wondrous and visionary universe, is clutching a video camera and filming the room and its contents from every angle possible. He moves quickly and then suddenly stops, as if mesmerised by the cascades of fabrics and light on show. With the atmospheric music and the garlands and screens of fabric caressing us as we walk around, the effect is at once enchanting, compelling, and, strangely reassuring; spontaneous, naive, yet also, somehow, highly sophisticated.

Boontje explains that the "collection began only eight weeks ago. At the moment it's a large collection of ideas which we can develop further." He does not yet know that some of the seven "haute couture" chairs on show will make their way into the Moroso collection. He points at their intricately embroidered and shaped covers. One chair is generously layered in white silk and covered in garlands of white cut-out flowers. Another has a rather incongruous death's head and thick flowers delicately embroidered onto a white silk slipcover. Boontje explains that he's "interested in fashion and the way fashion uses textile on the body. I wanted to bring some of that to the furniture I was making."

The space also showcases past highlights of Boontje's career, such as the Wednesday light (now mass-produced by Habitat in a larger version called Garland). Also on show is the chair from the 'Rough-and-Ready' collection, which he made from a wooden frame and an old blanket—he has handed out thousands of design sketches at different exhibitions so that people can make it themselves with "local materials and local skills". There is also the magical series of paper lights, greeting cards and curtains made out of a material called Tyvek by LA-based company Artecnic. Then there is the Blossom light, a delicate bough of crystal flowers made for Swarovski in 2002.

Another of Boontje's lights, a large, red crystal chandelier extravaganza called Ting Ting Ting, also made for Swarovski and its Crystal Palace Collection, wowed people in the fair's Fendi area. It is, he says, "enormously complex". Fitted with a motor and a sensor, "it starts rotating and the behaviour of the lights changes" if you come close to it. In between the crystal, says Boontje, "there are aluminium tubes which sometimes hit the crystal, or each other, and make this tinkling sound".

After this abundance of crystal, colour and flowers, it may come as a surprise to hear Boontje say: "My work used to be much more sparse and austere."

That was until about four years ago, when someone important came into his life. "My daughter Evie was born and at that point I felt I wanted to have something much warmer, much more loving, around me. We have really lost something; everything we design seems so cold and neutral."



### **SENSORIAL ASPECT**

Boontje became interested in decoration and spent a lot of time at London's Victoria & Albert Museum, "looking at 17th- and 18th-century furniture and objects" and "the huge archive of textiles". As he researched he started to appreciate the "sensuality" of these objects and realised he wanted to bring this back in his designs.

Born in Holland 36 years ago, Tord Boontje grew up in Zevenaar, "a very small village with a lot of countryside around it". The Boontje family holidayed in the forest in Sweden, the country which Tord's mother, a textile designer and teacher in history of art, is from. He met his wife, British artist Emma Woffenden, in the early 1990s while studying at the Royal College of Art (RCA) in London. She opened up the world of glass to him and together they started the tranSglass project in 1997. "Emma and I take old wine bottles and beer bottles and cut them up and make them into tableware," explains Boontje. "It looks better than it sounds; it's actually very sophisticated." This desire to reuse old materials echoes his philosophy of life. "It's important to choose carefully what you want to live with and ultimately not consume very much," he says.

Boontje is impenetrable and shy, but, at the same time, self-assured and enthusiastic. In addition to his design work, he teaches at the RCA in London and recently set his classa project to pick an everyday object from their homes and "change the sound that it makes". For Boontje, it is "important to develop the whole sensorial aspect of design. It's not the hard object but everything around it."

### **MAXIMUM SPONTANEITY**

Boontje appreciates old-fashioned skills. He has learned to embroider: "a slow process, like making drawings with a needle". He then applied a similar technique to cutting metal before trying it with glass, using planks of wood with nails sticking out to create the desired effect. "It is based on an old technique I once saw in a factory in Sweden," he explains. "There's this halfway step, where you can push things straight into the glass, where the glass sort of forms and you have to get the precision of the drawing. I really like that." This step allows for maximum spontaneity and speed and also for the unusual, handcrafted effect.

This celebration of craft and history is not necessarily meant to be labour-intensive. Of the Wednesday light, which is being mass-produced, Boontje says, "The original was much smaller and it was made in an incredible high-tech factory in England that works to a thousandth of a millimetre of accuracy. For a light, that's too precise." But without technology, Boontje would not have been able to create the variations of his cut-flower motifs. His screens of fake suede are so fine that they could never be cut by hand. Boontje decided to cut them with a laser (for others, he uses water-jets) to create a multi-sensorial effect. "The fabric is actually really strong," he says, tugging at the delicate blossoms. "When you look at these fabrics you don't see any of the technology behind it. It's more that you feel that it's something you haven't seen before; it's new."



### **HIGH-TECH AND HANDMADE**

The long silk panels are also a mix of the high-tech and the handmade. "With traditional screen printing, you could only print five or six colours," says Boontje. So he used a digital printer which could print thousands. Beginning with small watercolour paintings, he scanned them onto a computer and then "mirrored them to get an interesting repeat in the fabric".

The interactive Inflorescence computer program he has developed, with digital artist Andrew Shoben and a computer programmer, expands on this combination of creativity and craft. The program can go on creating different floral patterns "forever". Each time it is used, the program forgets what it has done before. "I thought it was nice to make this thing that only exists in the moment and doesn't have a past or a future." He now plans to generate 3D models, which he will make using a stereolithography (3D printing) technique. "That's the next step," he says excitedly. "It's still very much a research thing."

Touches of romance and playfulness are never far away in Boontje's world. The sinuous jet-black urns, which he made for a 2002 exhibition, 'Dead', at the London Institute, are designed to contain a loved one's ashes, with plants sitting on the top. The stain of colour on the clean metal table is actually coloured resin, says Boontje. "It seemed nice to have the precision of the metal and then something very organic and fluid to go with it. I like the idea that you don't quite know if it was deliberate or an accident."

As we talk a woman walks in and waves her hands about animatedly: "Everyone is talking about this," she says. Then she corrects herself: "Everyone is talking about you." Boontje smiles.

He says he feels no pressure to produce. "I'm not a manufacturer," he says. "I'm not the kind

who goes looking for work. I'd rather start doing my own thing and keep that kind of independence." However, he is happy for his creations to be accessible to many. "It's important that people can rally afford some things. It's like when you make music: you can play chamber music or you can make an album and have people all around the world dancing to it. I'd rather be the second one."

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