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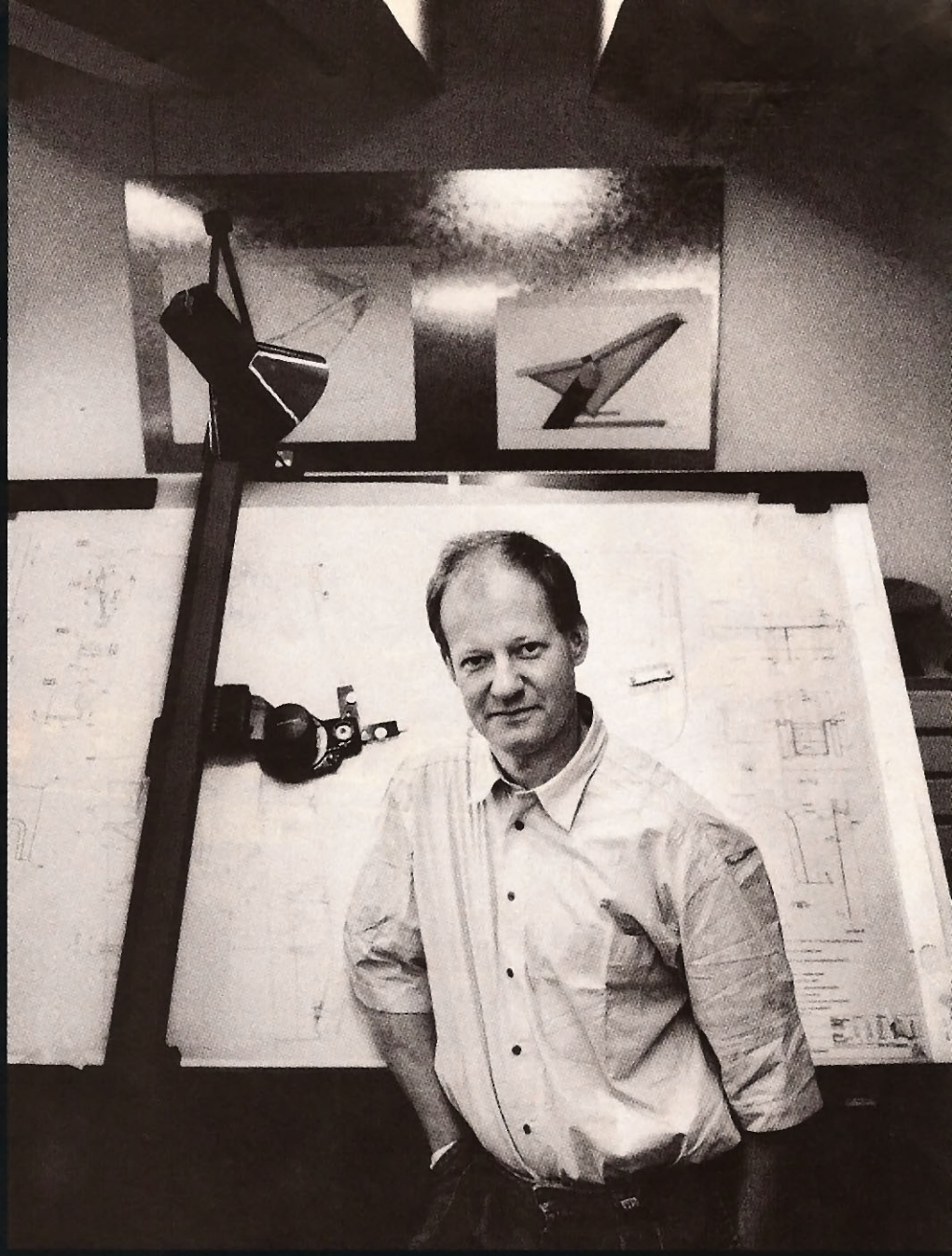
TOP FORM

Face to face with four leading Dutch designers. Text: Anne Lavelle. Portraits: Maarten Corbijn



BRUNO NINABER VAN EYBEN
industrial designer

If you've been to the Netherlands recently, you've almost certainly seen some of Bruno Ninaber van Eyben's industrial designs. In fact, you've probably handled it, then spent it, as the Dutch coins now in circulation are minted to Ninaber's specifications. And if you sent postcards home, you'll not only have paid for them with his work, you'll have posted them in another piece of design developed by his partnership, Ninaber Peters, Krouwel.

"The Dutch Post Office is one of our major clients," says Ninaber, who at 40 is considered one of the Netherlands' top industrial designers. "There is a specific focus in this country on industrial design in the public sector that goes back to the Thirties. The trend was set by the man who then headed the Post Office. He was a design buff, so he introduced an aesthetic department to create a specific PTT (Dutch Post Office) look. One of the things he decided was that employees needed special chairs. And he didn't just get any old carpenter in to make them. He got Berlage. It was a true innovation in those days. And, like most trends, it had a spin-off effect in other areas of the public sector. You could say that industri-

al design got a fairly early start in this country because of this guy's hobby."

Ninaber didn't set out to become an industrial designer, in fact he is self-taught. "At first, I studied applied arts at the academy in Maastricht. I think I first began to get into the industrial side of design because it seemed to me more socially involved. I was at the academy in the late Sixties and at that time most of my contemporaries were socially committed. Coming from an artist's family – my father was a painter – I took beautiful things for granted. For me art never had a capital 'A'. When I was studying, there was a general feeling that artists should make pieces of work that could be reproduced, everyone should be able to have a beautiful thing. I began applying that kind of thinking and it gradually became clear what I really wanted to do. I wasn't looking to make unique pieces of anything but I did want to make beautiful ones.

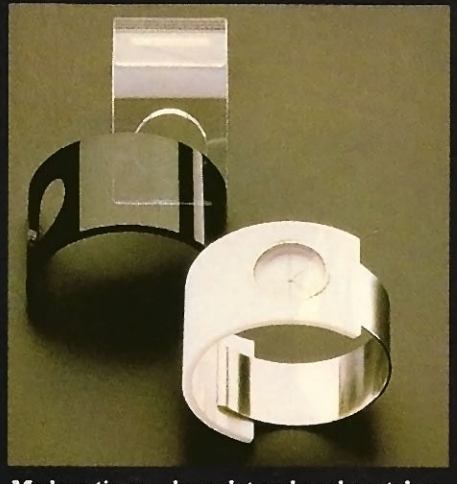
"Industrial design as we know it is a relatively new discipline, in that in this field the value of an object is not defined by its uniqueness, but by the beauty of its form." Ninaber reckons. "But the tradition goes back a long way. Just take Rietveld, he started as a cabinet maker. His ideas were socially oriented too. He made beautiful things, yet one of his priorities was that they could be mass-reproduced. He went on to become an architect, and we still have people like that, people who evolve through craftsmanship in one field into another, related field.

"To me, craftsmanship is an important aspect. You have to have a real knowledge of all the components that make up your profession, know all the essential elements thoroughly. Here at the partnership we have workshops where we test materials, experiment with new ones. We make our own prototypes and models. If you don't have an intimate understanding of the materials you work with, you can't produce anything of real value."

But what is industrial design? The name evokes visions of huge machines or unidentifiable parts of them. Yet Ninaber and his partners create a whole range of different objects, including elegantly streamlined wrist-watches. "There's often no distinct dividing line between the applied arts and industrial design," says Ninaber. "Industrial here means it can be reproduced, not that a specific item is used in the industrial reproduction process itself. When a client comes to us with a problem, and that can be anything from a coin to a post-box, you first spend a lot of time analysing all the factors involved in that particular problem. It's a complex process, because the client has set requirements, but as you consider the problem you often come up with a host of other factors that are indispensible to the development of an object. That can produce its own problems. Sometimes you have to go back to the client and say: 'Are you sure this is what you want, because if you add factor A to B, then include C, it simply won't work.' In this way, you develop what we call a programme of requirements."

Once Ninaber has come up with a programme that encompasses all these requirements, he develops it further into "something you can put down on paper. We start making sketches, and new requirements develop. Often, we'll make a number of proposals all using different materials. Then you have to weigh those proposals against the requirements. It's kind of like walking towards something concrete that is shrouded in mist. The closer you get to the heart of the problem, the clearer it all becomes. It's a development process in the true sense of the word. You don't just say to yourself: 'Oh, I like yellow, let's make it yellow.' Or: 'It has to be a box, well a box is square.' I'd say it was essentially based on the 'function follows form' concept. When you have created a good design, it looks and feels right." ■

NINABER PETERS KROONWEL



Modern times – bracelet and neck watches

Keeping in touch with the 'intelligent' telephone...

Below: All change for the Dutch guilder

...and the single post-box