

Recreating the Dutch masters



Photo: Indigo Jones

The work of the Dutch masters is something most people only ever see in a museum, but a new generation of artists is viewing the past with a very different eye. TIFFANY JANSEN talks to some of the contemporary artists breathing new life into traditional works.

For such a small country, the Netherlands has had quite an impact on the art world: from early Netherlandish paintings to Masters of the Golden Age to the contem-

porary artists of the 19th and 20th centuries to the creative Dutch minds still making waves today.

Rembrandt van Rijn, Johannes Ver-

meer, Vincent van Gogh, Piet Mondrian, Gerrit Rietveld... The list goes on and on. Even those unfamiliar with the names will certainly recognise the works attributed to them.

Artists have long turned to Dutch art for inspiration, and still do so today. Albeit through very unconventional means.

Take the domino artist who goes by the name FlippyCat. Using precisely 7,067 coloured domino bricks, he recreated "The Starry Night," arguably Vincent van Gogh's finest work.

The complex structure took two attempts - the second of which took a whopping 11 hours to build.

The resulting time-lapse video, aptly named "Starry Night - Vincent van Dornogh" was uploaded to YouTube on 22 June 2012 and, at the time this article was written, has been viewed 1,506,039 times.

Netherlands-based design duo Minale-Maeda, made up of Mario Minale and Kuniko Maeda, paid homage to Dutch architect Gerrit Rietveld in 2004 when they constructed a replica of his famous "Red-Blue Chair" using Lego.

Rietveld, a self-taught architect, created the design with the intent that people would be able to build the system themselves using available materials. "We wanted to update the 'simple techniques and readily available material' to something that reflects today's society," Minale explains. "It was Lego blocks, which are as simple to use as child's play - no tools or paint required."

The project required roughly 4,500 Lego blocks and, due to the fixed dimensions of the blocks, is six percent larger than the original. Thanks to an aluminium frame, the structure is stable enough to actually function as a chair.

But you don't have to have an astounding collection of dominos or a treasure trove of Lego to replicate the Dutch masters. American artist Nina Katchadourian showed that even the most unlikely items work just as well in her "Lavatory Self-Portraits in the Flemish Style."

Part of a larger ongoing project titled "Seat Assignment," the inspiration for "Lavatory Self-Portraits in the Flemish Style" came during a flight in 2010 when the artist spontaneously placed a paper toilet seat cover on her head while in the airplane lavatory.

"After I had taken the picture, I looked at it and thought 'I look Dutch,'" Katchadourian says of the experience. "That question of 'what looks Dutch' was interesting to me."

On a long-haul flight from San Francisco, California in the United States to Auckland, New Zealand, she took that thought and ran with it, creating an array of self-portraits recalling Flemish portraiture of the fifteenth century using nothing but her camera phone and items she found in the lavatory.

So, what is the recent attraction to recreating masterpieces using everyday objects, particularly given the advanced technology at our disposal these days?

"[Advanced technology]... can make us feel rather helpless and reliant on support when it doesn't work," Minale reasons. "The idea of making things oneself [using simple, everyday objects] comes from a desire and need for more self-responsibility."

In the case of Nina Katchadourian's "Lavatory Self-Portraits in the Flemish Style," she feels the attraction for art lovers is "the shock of seeing something that looks so recognisably art-historical, but which is made under such unusual circumstances."

A native Californian of Finnish-Armenian heritage, Katchadourian has always been drawn to the Flemish wing of museums and art galleries, with a particular love for Northern Renaissance portraiture.

"For me, [Lavatory Self-Portraits in the Flemish Style] was a kind of ethnic cross-dressing," she muses.

For Mario Minale and his partner Kuniko Maeda, the connection to Holland is more organic. The Italian Minale and the Japanese Maeda studied together at the Design Academy Eindhoven. They decided to set up shop in the Netherlands as it provided, according to their website, "a fertile common ground."

Minale praises the Netherlands for its hands-on, practical approach and drive for innovation. "Nothing seems impossible," he enthuses.

That mentality is most certainly evidenced in this small country's impressive mark on the world's canvas.



Photo: Nina Katchadourian