

Pepe Heykoop & Tiny Miracles FOUNDATION

M U M B A I

Background information: relevant press

A. Interview with Fast Company USA (May 2 2014)

(Fast Company USA: *"Written for, by, and about the most progressive business leaders, Fast Company inspires readers and users to think beyond traditional boundaries, lead conversations, and create the future of business."*)

'Reinventing Fair Trade: starting with a high design Paper Vase'

For four generations, a community of traditional basket weavers sat along Mumbai roads and sold their goods. But after it became easy to buy cheap plastic baskets from China, suddenly they had no work—and as "untouchables," on the lowest rung of the Indian social hierarchy, they couldn't easily get other jobs. With little or no education, young women from the community often ended up working in the red light district.

A Dutch bank employee who happened to be working temporarily in India decided to help, in part by creating a new international market for products made by the women. She decided to take a different path than the traditional fair trade project: Her nonprofit, the Tiny Miracles Foundation, is working with women to make designs that look nothing like what they might have made in the past—not crafty, or Indian, or even homemade.

Instead, Dutch designer Pepe Heykoop is creating custom products that a global market would want to buy regardless of where they're coming from, not out of any sense of guilt or responsibility to support the workers, but because the designs stand on their own.

"From a design perspective we have always strongly believed that consumers should buy our products first because they like the design, secondly because of the story," says founder Laurien Meuter. "In our opinion, this is the most sustainable way of creating many, many jobs.

After experimenting with a few products, Heykoop designed a paper vase that can be folded flat to ship in an envelope. Sewn in a geometric pattern, the paper form can be adjusted to cover a bottle, making an instant vase. The construction is easy to make, but time intensive, so the women have plenty of work, and it can be sold relatively inexpensively at retail, so there's a high volume of sales. Since it launched the vase last year, the foundation has been selling about 100 a day, providing full-time

employment for 80 people. The women recently began producing a flat pack lampshade as well, and more products will follow.

Unlike many other fair trade projects, the foundation is also going well beyond employment. "We believe that to break a poverty cycle, you need to tackle issues in all areas of their life, not only just give them work," says Meuter.

The foundation educates parents on the importance of sending children to school, and then helps send the children in the community to better schools where they can learn English and tech skills. Adults are given classes in money management, family planning, and dealing with addiction. The foundation also provides free access to health care.

Soon, Meuter hopes to set up a company in India so workers can become shareholders, earning savings that they will be able to access at a later point. "This is much better than increasing their salary to large sums today," she explains. "It creates a mess if they suddenly start earning say \$50 a day. It will lead to violence, addiction, and so on as they don't know how to handle it."

By 2020, the foundation has one goal: To help lift all 700 people in the community from extreme poverty to the middle class. Already, thanks to the success of the paper vase, they say they're halfway there—an achievement all the more impressive because the whole organization is run by a small handful of people, with everyone who works internationally volunteering their time.

"We can make the world a better place," Meuter writes on the foundation's site. "How? By just rolling up our sleeves and doing it."

B. Interview during Salone del Mobile 2014 with Dezeen (Chief Editor Marcus Fairs) about Paper Vase Cover

Milan 2014: product designed by Dutch designer Pepe Heykoop to be made in an Indian slum has been a runaway success, creating employment for 80 families within a year of launch

Speaking to Dezeen in Milan last week, Heykoop said workers making his Paper Vase earned on average the equivalent of ten Euros per day, which is ten times the average wage in the Mumbai slum.

"The ambition is to have 700 people out of poverty in ten years time," said Heykoop. "We are pretty much half way".

Initially launched in February last year, Heykoop presented the vase at Ventura Lambrate in Milan this year along with a range of other products he designed as part of a project organised by charity the Tiny Miracles Foundation to lift people out of poverty in Mumbai.

Orders for the vase are averaging around a couple of 100 per day (retail + online orders), allowing the foundation to keep 80 women in regular employment.

However the other products proved unsuitable to the project, which struggled for the first couple of years.

"In 2012 we never thought this was actually happening and now there's light at the end of the tunnel and there's a really good vibe going," Heykoop said.

The success of the flat-pack vase – which is made of paper and sewn together – has led Heykoop to develop another folded paper product. Prototypes of his flatpack Paper Lamp were on show at Ventura Lambrate.

"The paper vase was the breakthrough and for 2014 I have this paper folded light, which has the same principal and has been flat-packed in an envelope," said Heykoop.

After they're made, the products are shipped from Mumbai to Heykoop's studio in Amsterdam then distributed to consumers worldwide. However, if the buyers live east of India then the designs are shipped straight from there to save them travelling all the way around the world.

The Tiny Miracles Foundation, set up in 2010, is half way towards its goal for 2020 to provide 150 families with a wage of fifteen euros a day – the UNICEF standard for a middle class wage – in return for their production skills. (of course this needs to be adjusted upward for inflation along the way)

Heykoop's original ideas for the project were lampshades from lambskin, transforming traditional water carriers into leathery vases, but the products proved difficult for the community to produce and too expensive for consumers to purchase.

"I started off with leather lampshades; they're like 550 Euros in the shop," he said. "It's nice when you sell a bunch of them but you have work and then you don't have work for a few weeks. These ladies were coming to me and asking 'can I work next month', and I wanted to say yes but I couldn't, because the products were not selling on a daily basis."

Heykoop hopes to train the families in Mumbai to manage the distribution themselves, so the process becomes contained within the community after the programme finishes in six years time.

"This foundation stops in 2020 but it doesn't mean that this workshop stops in 2020," Heykoop explained. "If we stop the workshop in 2020, it will all collapse again. If the foundation stops providing the information, then they should be self sustainable."

Here's an edited transcript of the interview with Pepe Heykoop:

Marcus Fairs: Tell us about the project that you're showing in Milan.

Pepe Heykoop: I've been a collaborator for four years with Tiny Miracles Foundation, which has been set up by my cousin. This community group that we're aiming at lives in a slum in Mumbai and they used to be basketry weavers. They earned one euro a day for the whole family.

Most of them were illiterate, couldn't count to ten it was like hardcore surviving on the streets. Then my cousin started the foundation and she asked me: "Pepe can you design some items that we can produce with them because we want to bring education, we want to bring healthcare but we also want to provide jobs so they can eventually pay for the healthcare and education themselves."

So I went there and for me it was the second time in India, and it's such a different world. When I started designing things, it was really hard to blend in with their way of thinking and their world and my world. It took two and a half years to find something that really worked.

Marcus Fairs: What's the ambition of the Tiny Miracles Foundation? To employ people?

Pepe Heykoop: The ambition is to have 700 people out of poverty in ten years time. I'm only working on the creating jobs pillar and Laurien [Meuter] was taking care of the healthcare and education, other pillars.

Marcus Fairs: So the idea was for you to come up with some products that they could manufacture?

Pepe Heykoop: Well all of them can do basketry weaving with their eyes closed but I said I don't want to do something with weaving or bamboo, because it has this ethnic look and this fair-trade image and I think we should focus on something new. That a product should sell itself. You want it because you like it, you buy it and then the story is a plus, an extra.

Marcus Fairs: You don't buy it because you feel guilty, or feel sorry for people.

Pepe Heykoop: No, there's a lot of good initiatives. You want to support them and then you get an ugly basket, you know what I mean. So these products don't look like they've been made by these people living on the street and that's where I wanted to go.

But it's hard. It's hard when people cannot count to ten to work with them but luckily there was this force within me to not give up and act like a pit bull, hanging on. We found something with the folded paper vase covering to be put around an empty bottle and shipped in an envelope. It comes as a gift and it works out really well. We've sold like 100 pieces a day at the moment and that's why now, starting off with seven people in 2011, now

we have over 80 people employed in 2014. We're heading towards a goal of a group of 700 people, equal to about 150 families.

Marcus Fairs: So that's the target?

Pepe Heykoop: This is half way. The project takes until 2020, so in four years we are pretty much halfway. In 2012 we never thought this was actually happening and now there's light at the end of the tunnel and there's a really good vibe going on since about one and a half years ago.

Marcus Fairs: Tell us briefly about the other two products.

Pepe Heykoop: The paper vase was the breakthrough and for 2014 I have this paper folded light, which has the same principal and has been flat packed in an envelope. The weight's really low.

These samples I've been making during the last week in the studio are prototypes, and I'm testing colours now and colours of the treads and we'll see which one it's going to be. This paper should be coated and then within three seconds you just pop it up and there's a certain tension in the paper, which gives it shape. So then we're going to sell this separately, the electricity and separately the shade, if you want to change it for a different colour.

It should also be a low price range. The Paper Vase is 19 euros in the shop and this one we want to have 35, 39 euros for the other. Everybody can buy it, because that's the only way we can have these women working on a daily basis.

I started off with leather lampshades; they're like 550 euros in the shop. It's nice when you sell a bunch of them but you have work and then you don't have work for a few weeks and then there's work and then there's not work. These ladies were coming to me and asking "can I work next month", and I wanted to say yes but I couldn't, because the products were not selling on a daily basis.

Marcus Fairs: So what techniques do they use to manufacture these?

Pepe Heykoop: There's paper and sewing. Actually I started off in 2011 with the welding and way too complex techniques, and I had failure after failure. Then at a certain moment, I said I'll get a folding class and I invited 30 women to come and fold a sheet of paper in half. None of them could do this correctly and then I was shocked because I thought "this is the final try" if folding a sheet of paper doesn't work.

So then of course after some training, I made something like a game out of it, because I want this workshop to have a really positive vibe and I hate production in China where you're not allowed to see how stuff is done. If you know where your T-shirt is coming from in these factories in Bangladesh, you don't want to wear it. So I said we can do, of course we can do

production in such a nice way as I can do it in Amsterdam. We can do it there as well and we don't just take something but we also give something back. That's the whole.

Marcus Fairs: Do they work from home or is there a workshop they go to?

Pepe Heykoop: We started off with a really dark crappy spot near the street; there were rats running round and cockroaches and rain was coming in, but you should start from something. Then in 2012, we changed into a bigger room and now we have a big room, a proper room that's clean and light. There's no rain coming in.

Marcus Fairs: And you said that people get paid to eat, one euro a day. Do you pay them the same, or do you pay them more than the average?

Pepe Heykoop: No no no, they used to earn one euro a day with basketry weaving for the whole family and we go up to ten euros a day, which is the UNICEF standard for middle class. Now it's eight euros but by 2020, it will be something around ten. If you increase the salary ten times more, you will only ruin the system over there because they will hate each other; who can work with us and who can't. So we integrate this amount in education and doctor visits. So now behind the scenes we are paying that and every year they should pay 10 percent more for education and doctor visits. So within ten years, they are paying this themselves gradually.

Marcus Fairs: And finally, do they make the products and also ship the products to the customers, or do they put them in a big crate and send them to you in the Netherlands and then you do it from there?

Pepe Heykoop: For the moment, we have everything sent to Holland. Except for orders that go to Japan or Australia, like the other way round, then we ship them directly. But it involves a lot of training, because there should be final checks, so we do some final checking in Holland but we want to train them to do that.

This foundation stops in 2020 but it doesn't mean that this workshop stops in 2020. So the foundation helps with understanding how it works, with the doctor visits and the schooling and whenever they make the money. If we stop the workshop in 2020, it will all collapse again. If the foundation stops providing the information, then they should be self-sustainable.

C. Interview with Pepe Heykoop (about his design philosophy)

You're drawn to recycling materials and up cycling objects. How can this be both empowering and limiting to your practice?

Sure this is both. It is limiting in the way that I often use a found material as a starting point to make an object, not the other way around. When a found material really made it all the way up, being transformed into a new object with a new status... yes that is empowering. Recently I have used discarded pallets to make a bench. When this piece was on show during Salone del Mobile recently I had to tell the visitors explicitly that they were sitting on 3 discarded pallets. That meant the project has succeeded to me.

What are the latest low-tech techniques that you've discovered in your studio?

Well, ripping pallets apart and turning them into benches was pretty low-tech.

As someone who continuously explores the link between design and art, what fascinates you the most about this route?

I would name it differently; I'm involved in two studio's.

Studio Pepe Heykoop explores the use of (discarded) materials and produces small handmade design editions.

Pepe Heykoop & Tiny Miracles Foundation have their production house in Mumbai, India. There we have the aim to have a community of 700 people out of poverty in ten years time (by2020).

Providing work is one of the pillars next to education and healthcare. I'm in charge of the designs to be executed in this workshop with them. This results in design products meant for retail.

Because of this wide range of designs that I work on it is always a challenge. A challenge in different layers.

If a major furniture brand were to approach you to mass produce one or more of your pieces, how would you respond?

Probably they cannot be mass-produced because my mind doesn't work like that. But well let's say that they have a great offer; then the production method has to satisfy me. Just pumping more items onto this globe doesn't make me happy. It has to make sense.

How has your work with the Tiny Miracles Foundation changed you as a person and as a designer? Wow, as a person: actually

when I was younger and just did my high school I had never felt the urge to make my contribution to the world. Not actively. Since I joined my cousin Laurien on her foundation and saw with my own eyes that you can make a difference... that changed a lot. I make things: that is my job. But combining production in such a way with the goals of the Foundation is really giving me chicken skin every now and then. Over a hundred children are going to school now out of this project and currently we provide jobs for over eighty women. Still it is important to focus a lot on the right design. The paper vase cover is something that works. I don't mind nowadays to make a commercial print on it to keep the demand going. No, who am I?

Tell us about your Design Days Dubai 2014 experience. What did you take from it?

Well, actually I haven't been there. Some items of my skin collection did so. They like to travel the world and inspire.

The latest show/exhibition you've seen that has inspired so many ideas in you...

wow that was a flock of birds in the sky. Nature provides great exhibitions too.

The pieces you didn't expect to be such a hit...

I must come back to the paper vase cover. I remember it well, when we made the first samples to work around a pare cover to hide an ugly bottle and turn it into a vase. A crumbled piece of paper we made. It threw it in the bin... the day after we has a second look at it.

Now two years later over 80 women in Mumbai are making this item on a daily basis. And their (over a 100) children are going to school. That's a success!

The pieces that are much more complicated than they look...

The dye of the Tapepot consist over 12 pieces of plaster..

The pieces that have changed your outlook on design...

Again that entire project in Mumbai is the one to refer to.

Before that I made just one offs and small editions in Holland. It is a great feeling to sell some of your most expensive pieces, though it is a party with yourself. A success with the Pardeshis in Mumbai is to celebrate a party with 80 women, their families and my cousin. That's a party!

The designers who have had a major imprint on you...

when I was still in the design academy Eindhoven I had Jurgen Bey as a teacher for a short time. That inspired me a lot. Later on I could do my

internship in his place. Nowadays I'm keen on Joep van Lieshout's way to bridge his crazy ideas into reality.

The toughest challenge you face today...

The biggest challenge is to be open to absorb the world around us and wonder how it all works. A never-ending story isn't it?

You are featured in Lidewij Edelkoort's "Fetishism in Fashion". Why do you think your Skin Collection fits in this book?

Well, my need to hunt the streets and see the opportunities of what others dump there is something to start with. Then to cover them up in leather (scrap pieces) and make the skin tight around the object instead of the human. "Fetishism in Furniture"

A lot of your designs are offbeat and quirky. What are the most memorable reactions you've had from the public?

Just graduated I had made a chair with rubber joinery so it has flexibility while seating. That is something active. Anyhow there was the sketch presented as well next to the final versions. This first model was such flexible that you could push it all the way to floor like it was flat packed. A visitor tried to sit on that sketch and ended up lying on the floor, he called me up to say that he had broken my chair and felt very sorry... ☺

The works you are currently developing...

in Mumbai: "Folded Lampshade": with the same ingredients as the paper vase this could become a success too.

In Amsterdam: a screen/room divider. It has leather hinges. The panels are draped with transparent fabric.

You are counting the minutes until...

this screen is ready, I think it will be a nice one.