

Reinventing the look (even smell) of a book

By Alice Rawsthorn

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AMSTERDAM — When Irma Boom suggested designing a book in an unusually squat size and shape, it didn't go down well with the publisher. Nor did her insistence that it should have a white cover, raggedy page edges and an introductory essay printed in type that starts off big and becomes smaller on successive pages.

"It was a struggle," Boom recalled. "I was suggesting something very different to all of the other books they'd published. But they were courageous and, finally, let me do it." The result, "Sheila Hicks: Weaving as Metaphor," was published last year by Yale University Press to accompany an exhibition of Hicks's textiles at the Bard Graduate Center in New York. It has since won a shoal of design prizes, and on Friday is to be awarded the Gold Medal at the Leipzig Book Fair for "The Most Beautiful Book in the World."

Winning prizes is nothing new for Boom. Working with a single assistant in her Amsterdam studio, she is also accustomed to struggling — in one way or another — to make each of her books as inspiring and surprising as possible. Over the years, she has experimented with everything from elaborate color-codes and hidden motifs to scented bindings, printing on filter coffee paper, producing a 2,136-page book with no page numbers or index,

and hacking page edges with a circular saw.

Unexpected though Boom's books look, feel and smell, there is always an underlying logic to their design. The rough-hewn edges of Hicks's book evoke the selvages of her textiles, and the white cover was chosen as a contrast to their rich colors. The shrinking type was conceived to coax people into reading the introductory essay by the philosopher Arthur Danto, by drawing them into the text with big lettering at the beginning.

"Irma is a genius at combining form and content," said the graphic design historian Emily King. "She finds formats and materials that perfectly match her subjects. Her books are beautiful, satisfying objects that aren't simply exercises in formal skill. She uses design to deliver content in a brilliant fashion, interweaving stories, creating tension and surprise."

Boom always loved books but discovered book design by accident. Born in the Dutch city of Lochem in 1960, she studied painting at art school in nearby Enschede, and wandered into a lecture on books one day.

"The teacher didn't say anything about design, just showed us books and read from them," she recalled. "I joined the class and finally joined the graphic design department."

After graduating, she was offered a job in the government printing office in The Hague. "I thought, 'No way, it'll be too dull,' but everyone advised me to go there and learn how to design." She planned to stay for a year but was there for five, experimenting from the start. An annual report for Raad vor der Kunst, the arts funding body, was printed solely in red, blue and yellow, with the size of type on each spread determined by how big — or small — it needed to be to fit a particular text on those two pages.

While working at the government printing office, Boom met Paul Fentener van Vlissingen, chief executive of the Dutch conglomerate SHV. When she left to open her own studio in 1991, he asked her to create a personal book for him to give to family and friends on his birthday. He also commissioned Boom, and the art historian Johan Pijnappel, to produce a book to commemorate SHV's centenary in 1996.

They had an unlimited budget, and an exceptionally indulgent patron. "All he said was, 'Make something unusual,'" Boom said. "It started out as a dream project but became a nightmare, because of the time." Having decided to compile the book from found text and images, she and Pijnappel scoured SHV's archives for material and traveled all over the world to find more. When Boom had to cancel the order for her first choice of paper (after being told by the Japanese producer that it would take 14 years to make) she invented her own paper.

The book emerged with 2,136 pages — but no numbers because Boom wanted people to dip in and out, rather than to read it sequentially. Gorgeous to look at and rich in symbolism, it is laden with color-coding, mixes of type, and page edges that depict a tulip field when seen from left to right, and a Dutch poem from right to left. It won numerous design prizes but absorbed five years of Boom's life, broken only by an annual month of teaching at Yale, leaving her exhausted, more than 20 kilograms, or 45 pounds, heavier, and with agonizing backaches.

Slowly she recovered, and designed more books for Van Vlissingen (who died last year) as well as monographs for artists and architects, and a cookbook. Boom enjoys working on several projects at once, and trying out new projects, like designing stamps and the corporate identity of the Dutch ceramics company Royal Tichelaar Makkum.

So far the Hicks book is her favorite. "Such a struggle, but the best book I've done," she said. Hicks herself praises the "strong design sense, very original use of typography, and sensitivity to paper and printing" that Boom brought to the book. Part of its appeal — and the challenge of creating it — for Boom is that such a complex object, with so many layers of meaning, was industrially produced, unlike the handmade books she dismisses as "macramé."

"There are so many possibilities with books, and so much to explore," she said. "At a time when the Internet is so powerful, making books is more and more important. Seeing Sheila's work in a book is completely different to seeing it on the Internet. That's why I'm always looking for new things to do with books."