

# Claes Iversen

He is Holland's favourite Danish - and with that we don't mean the sweet pastry but most loved Scandinavian fashion designer. A conversation with Claes Iversen about couture, Miffy, national identity and fairytales.

Claes Iversen (37) welcomes *Prestige* in his beautiful canal house in Amsterdam. Outside it is raining cats and dogs, inside his home is warm and cosy thanks to Iversen's impeccable taste in interior design and his radiant smile. The floors of the building, that accommodates both the designer's home as well as his studio, are clad with colourful Persian carpets. "We also used them to cover the 37 meter long runway during my latest show at Mercedes-Benz FashionWeek Amsterdam", Iversen candidly explains when asked upon. "It gave a warm, homely look. Besides that, using them was a creative way to deal with our limited budget." Nobody in the audience probably noticed that limited budget, the show and collection radiated pure class and luxury. In this way, Iversen's latest presentation was a perfect closing of the Dutch fashion week that took place in January. According to the designer, being the last in line doesn't give any extra pressure. "You always have to give it the best you got." And that's exactly what he did.

Iversen presented two collections simultaneously, both his prêt-à-porter collection *II By Claes Iversen* as well as couture pieces for FW2015/2016. Icelandic sagas and Norse mythology and fairytales, combined with the style of Yves Saint Laurent's iconic *Russian Collection*, inspired both collections. The result: a whimsical and romantic yet at the same time powerful and surprisingly graphic look, thanks to the rich materials and beautiful details mixed with patchwork and innovative materials. Highlights in the couture collection were the patchwork-lace, breath-taking wedding dress and a voluminous fake-fur coat made of loops of satin ribbons and wool thread. The prêt-à-porter collection showed in-house developed materials like 'beasty' mohair and furry teddy, but also fragile transparent organza embroidered with white flowers, referring to elves. A fairytale-like combination Hans Christian Andersen himself would be proud of.

At the end of the show Iversen walked on the runway to receive his well deserved round of applause, wearing a T-shirt

that stated "Today is a good day". "I felt very happy indeed. It was the second time me and my team showed a prêt-à-porter collection, the first time was last season, and we are really getting a grip upon this new way of working. Those two different processes require a different way of operating. This show was a victory after overcoming some setbacks, so we felt good. We did our best and everything looked great in the end, so I was very pleased with that."

## National Identity

The fact that Iversen's latest designs were inspired by Nordic mythology and fairytales is perhaps not very surprising, seeing the roots of the designer. Iversen was born in Aarhus, Denmark, and lived in Norway for a few years as a child. As a twenty-year-old, the designer moved to Holland. "At first I wanted to stay for only a year. But I got myself a job, worked as an accountant for five years and finally decided to study fashion at the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague." When asked upon the way he mixes both his Danish heritage as well as Dutch design-aesthetics in his work, Iversen thoughtfully states: "I am not consciously thinking about those national identities. I am educated in Holland, so I guess in a way my design aesthetics are Dutch, but of course I am still Danish."

Rethinking the issue, Iversen continues: "When you live abroad, your roots become more important. There was a period in which I felt torn apart, I didn't feel like I belonged anywhere. I felt at home and at the same time alienated in both Holland and Denmark. Now I feel completely at home here, but also in Denmark." Perhaps national pride is a subconscious thing, because those who witnessed his last show could have noticed that the three most striking dresses were funnily enough, a red, white and blue dress. Yes, the colours of the Dutch flag. "That was a coincidence." Iversen smiles. "It was only when we finished the collection I realized these three dresses that were made from the same patchwork-lace

# Best of both worlds

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technique are in these colours.”

Holland clearly loves Iversen and embraces him as a true Dutchman, because in the last few years he got a couple of honorable tasks. In 2011, the designer was asked to design a dress for a statuette of Miffy, the leading lady of most Dutch kids favorite book series. “She was a doll to work with”, Iversen jokes about the rabbit. “She doesn’t talk much but she is a true character. Plus, she doesn’t have normal arms. You need these kind of challenges as a designer.” After the Miffy-adventure, Iversen was asked to design the commemorative coin for the inauguration of King Willem Alexander that took place in April 2013. A year later he designed the dress singer Ilse DeLange wore at the Eurovision Song Contest in Copenhagen. When she won second place, the whole world saw Iversen’s creation. “I was so proud, standing next to the ‘green room’. It was in my home country, but I felt Dutch. The year before that Denmark won, making me feel proud as a Dane. When it comes to soccer, I am Dutch again.” Sounds like the best of both worlds.

Iversen’s fairytale-like last collection was not the first time the designer, who normally sports a more clean style in his work, showed Scandinavian influences. For his very first collection eight years ago, he used the pattern of Royal Copenhagen: a traditional kind of porcelain from his homeland, decorated with blue patterns. Sitting in his home on Danish design furniture, we drink tea from this porcelain. “I collect it”, Iversen explains. How did he end up using the romantic source of inspiration that he did for last season? “Every collection is like going on a journey. You have to have a specific destination in order to take the travel. This time I wanted to go somewhere warm and wintry, yet cold at the same time. It reminded me of my roots.” The designer explains how he likes to come up with a new, unexpected angle for every collection to surprise the audience. This time around he chose an ethnic, eclectic translation of the Nordic sagas and fairytales. “I wanted to stay away from the costume-like look of ethnical fashion, that’s is why I chose patchwork: it’s both romantic as well as graphic.”

### Artistic Story

So what’s next for Iversen? The creative entrepreneur wants his company to grow even further, which means focussing on prêt-à-porter without forgetting about couture. “Both lines are connected”, Iversen enthusiastically explains. “They strengthen each other. Creating those two collections comes from both an artistic as well as a business-drive. I love making couture and the challenge of making voluminous dresses that focus on craft and materials. Even though I am not obliged to sit behind a sewing machine anymore since I have my head of atelier doing that for me - who is way better at it than me - I still like to work on one piece every season. Just to touch the fabric and stay connected. Last season I worked on one of the fake-fur coats, the year before I hand-stitched a

voluminous yellow dress. Both items took hundreds of hours of work, divided over several people of course. Yet besides loving this handicraft, I am a designer and not a couturier. Making a good trenchcoat or T-shirt can be just as interesting. Creating prêt-à-porter completes my artistic story.”

But making ready-to-wear needs a different focus as Iversen learned the last couple of years. “You have to be very flexible and think about all steps in the process: from making a technical drawing and communicating with oversea-producers, to choosing fabrics and staying within your budget. The process can go wrong at so many points.” With prêt-à-porter Iversen is also challenged to design for a wider range of consumers with different sizes. “I always design from my ideas about fashion and aesthetics, but I find it very important that all prêt-à-porter-customers take home a little piece of couture as well. It is not fast fashion, if you purchase an item from my prêt-à-porter collection you buy a label made with love and a philosophy behind it. You can see that in the execution and detailing.”

One may also find it in Iversen’s approach: when his first prêt-à-porter collection was ready, he personally delivered it to his points-of-sale. “I rented a van and shook hands with all sellers. I got to know all the stores, which is great: it gives me an idea of who my client is.” Iversen’s targeted client is a rather abstract figure and doesn’t influence his design process. In general he says to design for independent, hard-working women. “She can be a businesswoman or a housewife, but she has a certain maturity that has nothing to do with age. She is passionate and serious about what she does. When it comes to prêt-à-porter, I also have to keep practical aspects in mind. A Dutch woman should be able to bike in some of my designs. My dream woman to dress? Actress Cate Blanchett. She is a talented, classic lady who is beautiful inside and out.” The designer also dreams about expanding his company towards the fields of accessories and shoes in the near future. “I enjoy my work and want to have the freedom to make whatever I want. In a few weeks we are moving to a bigger studio, that is the first step.”

The rain outside stopped. The future is bright and sunny for Claes Iversen.

On the right, image by Team Peter Stigter

