



Iris van Herpen

Johannes Vermeer Award Winner 2017

The jury's report

The Johannes Vermeer Award is the Dutch government's prize for the arts; its aim is to celebrate and encourage artistic talent. Since 2009, this prestigious award has been presented to an artist working in the Netherlands who has made a contribution of exceptional importance to art and society. In order to select the winner, the Minister of Education, Culture and Science is assisted by an independent jury, which conducts an extensive assessment of every corner of the art world, and also ensures that all the different branches of the arts are addressed proportionately. The jury also takes account of the stage in their career which potential prize winners have reached. The Johannes Vermeer Award is intended for those who have already produced a distinctive and established oeuvre, *and* from whom great things continue to be expected. In other words, the prize winner's artistic career is in full swing.

For the first time in the history of the prize, this year's edition has gone to an artist who works in the world of fashion. At the age of 33, designer Iris van Herpen is the youngest prize winner yet, although she already has gained so much experience and acclaim that she is an established part of today's national and international fashion scene. Over the last ten years, she has rapidly established her own renowned label, producing contemporary collections which are about so much more than just clothes. Her work has redefined the boundaries of fashion. Her style is characterized by an interdisciplinary approach: an idiosyncratic combination of the visual arts, dance, technology and

science, which not only creates breath-taking aesthetics, but also constantly pushes at the boundaries of fashion. Her designs create a bridge between artisan craftsmanship and radical innovation. This is a direct result of the creative curiosity and unbridled productivity that led the jury's unanimous decision to name Iris van Herpen as the winner of the Johannes Vermeer Award.

Iris van Herpen was born in 1984 in Wamel, a small town located on the river Waal in the province of Gelderland. Although her family had no particular artistic tradition, her own artistic sensibilities were encouraged, especially in dance and music. As a child, Van Herpen was often to be found in her grandmother's attic, where a collection of costumes and theatrical garb provided her with endless fun. As a teenager, she began to tailor clothes so that she could wear them herself. She always set herself the challenge of using as many different materials as possible. It could well be, she once remarked during an interview, that this was the source of what would later become her highly experimental approach.

After finishing secondary school, Van Herpen attended a programme in Fashion Design at the ArtEZ College for the Arts in Arnhem. She completed an internship with fashion designer Alexander McQueen in London and artist/textile designer Claudy Jongstra in Amsterdam. Both, in their own way, encouraged her fascination for working with diverse and unusual materials and techniques. After spending a year travelling in Australia, Van Herpen began her own label in 2007 from a studio in Arnhem. She presented her first collection at Amsterdam Fashion Week: *Chemical Crows*, for which she used the metal ribs from 700 children's umbrellas. After that there was no stopping her. Two years later, the American superstar Lady Gaga wore one of the creations from her *Mummification* collection and it truly seemed as if it was raining national and international accolades.

*Crystallization*, Van Herpen's sixth collection unveiled in 2010, represented another milestone. Not only on account of the famous 'watersplash dress' - a spectacular creation made from droplets of a synthetic material similar to plexiglass, for which Van Herpen collaborated with the architectural firm Benthem Crouwel - but also because it included her first 3D-printed garment. This intriguing, sculptural top was the product of another productive

collaboration, this time with the London architect Daniel Widrig and the Belgian .MGX by Materialise. Although the 3D-printed designs only make up a modest part of Van Herpen's larger oeuvre, it was the use of this innovative technique that helped her to cement her reputation in the fashion world. *Time* magazine pronounced her printed dresses, formed layer-by-layer, one of the fifty best inventions of 2011. In the same year she was invited to join Paris's prestigious Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture.

Not long after that, she relocated to Amsterdam. In her new studio, she not only threw herself into her haute couture collections, but also into a prêt-à-porter line. At least three books were published about her work, the first of which was part of the retrospective held by the Groninger Museum in 2012, which would go on to tour extensively throughout Europe and the United States. Meanwhile, six of her dresses were added to the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. In 2015, Van Herpen was appointed as a member of the Academy of Arts established by the Royal Netherlands Academy of Sciences.

Iris van Herpen is modest and introvert by nature. At the same time, her curiosity is extraordinary and regularly drives her to come out of her shell. Close collaboration with people from a range of different artistic and other disciplines has enabled her to expand and renew her oeuvre. Her interest in diverse subjects, including technology, architecture, dance, music and science, leads to surprising shapes and silhouettes. For her 2013 *Voltage* collection, which depicts the power of the body and in which the dresses resemble flashes of lightning and diverging rays of light, Van Herpen worked with the New Zealand experimental light artist Carlos Van Camp. But she was also inspired by Canadian architect Philip Beesley, who shares her love of special materials and structures. The architects Neri Oxman of the MIT Media Lab and Julia Körner helped her to develop sensational digital designs.

These individuals and their specialist knowledge have become an important part of her design studio. But it is Iris van Herpen herself who always has the last word. No haute couture dress leaves her studio without her having made a few final adjustments; her cutting-edge clothes are still the result of the old-fashioned skills of the artisan. She calls this 'New Couture'. Van Herpen is

intuitive, perfectionist and wary of compromise. When she has something in her mind, she keeps going until she achieves it. For example, she managed to persuade the company Materialise, which specializes mainly in medical products, to experiment with 3D-printed materials that would be more flexible than usual and therefore be better suited to clothing.

Wearability, and the widely assumed impracticality of her designs, is a recurring theme in the Netherlands, possibly because Dutch women may wonder whether they can ride a bicycle while wearing her expensive dresses. This is often surprising to Van Herpen, because she takes the human body - and how it changes through movement - as her starting point. This is also reflected in her keen interest in dance, which has fascinated her since she was a child. In 2014, she was commissioned by choreographer Benjamin Millepied to design the costumes for his piece for the New York City Ballet, *Neverwhere*. She replaced the iconic pink ballet shoes with boots made from stretchable black material that made the dancers' ankles appear rounder. Rounded ankles are a sign of grace, but excessive bending of the joints can be dangerous and lead to permanent damage. Van Herpen's design was referencing the extremely dark side of ballet, in which aesthetics are pursued to the point of destructiveness. She made the rest of the costumes from the same reflective black material. She felt a sense of awe at the premiere of Millepied's piece, she later told an interviewer - the dancers' bodies appeared to move like a liquid. In 2016 she collaborated with Millepied once again, this time for *Clear, Loud, Bright, Forward*, a choreography for the Opéra de Paris.

Van Herpen recreates the human body, giving fashion a new face. But no matter how futuristic her clothes may look and how obvious it may seem that actress Cara Delevingne should wear her silver 'Aeriforme' couture dress to the premiere of the science fiction film *Valerian and the City of a Thousands Planets*, Iris van Herpen's designs are in fact all about today. The techniques that she applies, the materials that they are based on - most of these have been around for some time. It just took somebody to conceive of using them to create fashion. So let that individual be the person who will today receive the Johannes Vermeer Award.

The jury has been profoundly impressed by Iris van Herpen's unique aesthetic vision. She is an exceptionally talented and ground-breaking designer who challenges fashion while at the same time redefining it. Her fascination with other the artistic disciplines ensures that she continues to approach the design process with an enthusiasm, originality and quality that has proved to be without parallel in the Netherlands or elsewhere. Van Herpen combines innovative digital techniques and revolutionary materials with traditional artisanship. Her ground-breaking collections, whether haute couture or prêt-à-porter, each have their own distinct and recognizable signature from the very beginning. But the new shapes and unusual silhouettes that she creates are never far-removed from the human body; they complement it, and make it stronger.

Full of conviction that her creative inspiration will continue long into the future, and that her work will continue to inspire and encourage others, the jury is proud to announce that Iris van Herpen is the winner of the Johannes Vermeer Award 2017.

*The prize jury consisted of Els van der Plas (chairperson), Michel van der Aa (laureate in 2015), Ann Demeester, Jeroen Krabbé and Stephan Sanders.*