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Interview – The Designer, Adrian van Hooydonk

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Dutch master

*Dutch designer Adrian van Hooydonk's work has been displayed in New York's Museum of Modern Art and countless car showrooms around the world. With designs for the BMW 7 Series, 6 Series and MINI concept car already on his résumé, he's now looking far into the future – and finding inspiration in Dubai. Text: **Matt Jones***

You probably haven't stopped to consider what car you'll be driving in 2018, but Adrian van Hooydonk has. As director of design for the BMW brand at BMW Group, it's the Dutchman's job to anticipate the vehicles that will be appearing on the road ahead. If van Hooydonk has his way, we'll all be driving – or aspiring to drive – the modern, avant garde works of art that are BMW cars.

The 42-year-old industrial designer, a graduate of Delft Polytechnic University in the Netherlands and Art Center Europe in Vevey, Switzerland, rose to prominence at the German luxury car maker with his design for the MINI ACV30 concept car in 1997. He followed this up in 1999 with his concept design for the BMW Z9 Gran Turismo.

Although neither vehicle was manufactured for a salivating marketplace, they caused a stir at motor shows and, in the MINI's case, at one of the world's leading art institutions – New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), which selected van Hooydonk's version of the MINI for inclusion in its "Different Roads: Automobiles for the Next Century" exhibition in 1999.

But it was his design for the re-launched BMW flagship 7 Series that sealed van Hooydonk's reputation with his predecessor, former BMW design director Chris Bangle, and the BMW board.

In 2001, the year the 7 Series was launched, the company appointed van Hooydonk president of California-based DesignworksUSA, the Charles Pelly-founded industrial design studio that BMW acquired as a subsidiary in 1995.

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As well as designing daring new models for BMW Group, including the new 3 Series, Z4 and Rolls-Royce Phantom, the studio has designed a variety of premium products for a range of clients, from the first and second generation Nokia Communicator phones to luxury airplanes for Embraer and Pilatus.

adidas, BenQ, Hewlett-Packard, Motorola, Siemens and Villeroy & Boch have all turned to DesignworksUSA for stylish new products. The studio that designed the BMW X5 also designed the X Series Lawn & Garden Tractor for farm equipment manufacturer John Deere.

By 2003, when his design for the 6 Series Coupe and Convertible was being admired by customers in BMW showrooms around the world, van Hooydonk was being lined up to succeed Bangle the following year at the company's Munich headquarters, where he now oversees the design process for every BMW car – not including MINI and Rolls-Royce – and a 100-strong design team that's spread between Bavaria, Southern California and Singapore.

“The design process for a new car takes one year,” van Hooydonk explains during a recent visit to Dubai. “The steps that we take are sketch based, then scale models, then full size models. Each of these steps takes roughly three months. And then, of course, in the final round of full size clay models, we go to a very high level of model making. Then, together with the BMW board, we select the final design for the exterior and the interior.”

Prior to joining BMW in 1992, van Hooydonk was an industrial designer for General Electric Plastics Europe and Depro Product Design, based in Guastalla, Italy. His rise through the ranks at BMW is all the more remarkable given the company's policy of having its designers compete with each other for every new model design. So when his designs for the 7 Series and 6 Series were approved for production, van Hooydonk had won internal design competitions.

“BMW believes in competition and this means that in design we are looking for the best idea and that can come from any designer,” he explains. “So for every car project we have a strong competition in design. Each designer contributes his or her own ideas and ultimately the company benefits – we have a good choice and a wide variety of ideas and my role now is to channel that stream of ideas and to help in the selection.”

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So does a production BMW display the marks of an individual designer? “I don’t think you can speak really of a personal touch – maybe you can, I don’t know – but for us in creating the 6 Series it was a great chance to continue something that BMW stands for, and that is luxury coupes, and the 6 Series, of course, is the top of the line coupe we make,” says van Hooydonk, who admits to driving a 130 himself, the smallest BMW, though he’s thinking of getting a Z4 Coupe next. “It was a fantastic project to be involved in. Which designer wouldn’t like to be doing a sports car like that?” he adds.

According to van Hooydonk, the average life cycle for a vehicle is eight years, which means even his stylish 7 Series will be due a facelift in 2009. “As a designer you work on future products,” he says. “Right now, we are working on the time window 2010 to 2018 – this is what we are doing right now. What happens after that, of course, is a little bit more speculative.

“What I’m expecting is that car design will continue to go in the direction of dynamicism. This is something that BMW has always done, but I see many other manufacturers going in that direction as well. We do that. We will also continue to do emotional design, which for us means sculpture. And we will continue to do very modern design, which means something very pure.

“It would be too hard for me to say what the whole car world is going to do, but BMWs are premium products and there will be an increase in demand for premium products. Because people are very well informed these days, they are a lot more conscious of what goes on in the world and therefore more responsible. When they spend money, I believe they want to spend it on something that really holds value and really shows integrity. And that is what we are trying to do. That is what motivates us – to do more of that; doing design that truly shows what the car can do that is not overly decorative and that is really highly emotional.

“The X5 is a good example of how our modern design language now gets spread over our entire product line up. It’s a car that has got more luxurious, more powerful, and I think the design expresses that. The extra power definitely comes across when you look at the front of the X5 or when you look at the wheel arches, which are much stronger and wider than the car before. The car is wider so it sits really well on its wheels. And in the interior you really experience the new luxury from BMW.

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“New materials are influencing design more and more. It used to be the other way around – that a designer would design a product and then choose a material. But today there are so many new materials available to us – and a lot of them we are developing ourselves – that actually this helps us to be even more creative and find new ideas for a car interior.

“We have always been racing. At the moment, we are in Formula 1, which is a very high technical challenge, but the company believes in these kinds of challenges and believes that they will make us stronger and better. In design, it’s the same thing. We have cutting-edge technology and so we also want to offer cutting-edge design. We will always be looking for very new and very modern shapes.”

So where does the inspiration for a new BMW come from? “Inspiration can come from anywhere,” says van Hooydonk. “Of course, our brand’s history is a strong and never ending source of inspiration. But also other fields of design, like fashion or product design or architecture. Basically life is what inspires us. And travel, too, is always very interesting.”

Which brings us neatly on to the subject of Dubai. With his keen eye for design, what does he think of the place? “I find it very inspirational,” he says. “It’s my first visit to Dubai and I’m leaving with a very positive impression of the Middle East and Dubai in particular. I sensed an overall feeling of optimism and openness that was very encouraging. I also felt a very strong passion for our brand, for BMW, and what was interesting to me was that this passion was based on a lot of the same things that other people in other parts of the world find fascinating about BMW. Overall, I’m leaving very encouraged to continue what we’re doing and to push even harder for modern, dynamic and elegant designs.”

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