

# Marketing Brand Canada

Our designers have been wowing markets around the world despite the little support they get at home. Now the attention is reaching critical mass and things look set to change

BY ERIC ENNO TAMM, VANCOUVER

At the time, Beth Hawthorn thought they were poking fun at her—and her country.

She's sitting in a cluttered studio with partner Robert Studer, both co-owners of This Is It. Design Inc, a savvy, independent design firm located in a light industrial area on the outskirts of Vancouver's sparkling downtown glass towers. Hawthorn is telling me a story and smirking mischievously, knowingly. The irony is rich. This week she is finally, belatedly getting the last laugh.

It was 1994 and, like many recent university grads, Hawthorn was teaching English in Japan and once a week instructing plucky prospective foreign students in Tokyo on how to interview for jobs in Canada as part of a working holiday program.

"What do you want to do when you go to Canada?" she would ask the Japanese students. "I want to build log cabins," they would invariably reply. Log cabins? Really? You can't be serious, she would counter. She figured they were probably just being playful, irreverent school kids. Hawthorn would smile meekly. The students would stare back blankly, blinking occasionally. They looked serious. In fact, they WERE serious.

What Hawthorn soon realized was that Canada's international image is frozen in time—and in the tundra. Think Canada and foreigners typically think igloos, rustic living, Mounties, maple syrup and snow. High-tech, hot design and haute couture? Hardly.

In Japan, Canada is stuck with this stereotype of yore. Some 80 percent of Hawthorn's students, like Monty Python, said they wanted to be a lumberjack and build log cabins. "I couldn't believe it. I was blown away," she says. "The log house thing caught me off guard every time. I thought it was a joke."

Hawthorn and Studer then throw me devilish grins. From Thursday to this Monday the design duo was cunningly using these ridiculous, bygone stereotypes of Canada as the platform—actually they were using polar-bear faux fur covered pedestals—to showcase the work of some of Vancouver's best designers during the Tokyo Designer's Week 2002.

Ingeniously, the exhibit titled Majiska? The Canadian Way of Living ("majiska" is a Japanese term used as an expression of disbelief, as in "really?") pokes fun at the Japanese and challenges their perceptions of us—a sweet irony for Hawthorn—while at the same time debunking our rustic image by surprising the Japanese with sleek, functional and highly contemporary designs from a country known more for the chainsaw than chaise lounge.

"The stereotypes and iconography—we're stuck with them, but you can play off them too," Studer says. "Our notions, our stereotypes, are actually nostalgic. It's what it used to be." Majiska? features the work of six Vancouver designers and artists: Hawthorn and Studer of This Is It Design, furniture designer Steve Suchy, Victor Chan of C-Design Studio, and artist Derek Brunen and fashion designer Natalie Purschwitz of the artist collective Inter.Mission Productions.

The exhibition presents new and conceptual designs in an outlandishly stereotypical way, stretching their functionality to the point of incredulity. This Is It Design's new laminated wood and stainless steel trays are presented as snowshoes. Chan's sleek Perf table series, which is made of perforated metal, is depicted as a strainer to make traditional apple cider. Purschwitz has designed a rain jacket which transforms into a one-person tent, taking Canadian outdoor fashion to hilarious new heights. And Suchy's "Twofold," a chair that folds into a table with a hidden hinge, is depicted as a nutcracker.

The entire exhibit juxtaposes what's young, edgy and innovative about Canada with what is banal or bygone. Majiska? also demonstrates the boldness of a new breed of Canadian designers who are confident enough about their creations to showcase them unconventionally. Chan's Perf table received an honourable mention in I.D. magazine's annual review and was featured on Oprah last month. And Studer has designed a WorldClock which will be selling in Bloomingdale's Christmas catalogue for about CDN \$1,400 a piece.

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According to the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, a Vancouver-based think tank, empirical studies have shown that a product's country of origin has an impact on purchasing decisions. Rightly or wrongly, stereotypes like German engineering, French cuisine, Japanese electronics and Italian fashion influence the way we think—and what we buy.

Which means that our hewers-of-wood-and-drawers-of-water image is no laughing matter. A survey of Asian attitudes towards Canada conducted by the Asia Pacific Foundation last year found that few thought we have a dynamic economy (22%), high technology (23%) or high-quality goods and services (27%). The challenge, however, is for Canadians to marry our natural resource strengths with new knowledge-based, creative industries. And we only need to look to our northern brethren, the Scandinavians, for an example of how design can be the key.

"We don't see any difference between cultural success and commercial success," says Kenneth Hagås, project manager for Swedish Style ([www.swedishstyle.net](http://www.swedishstyle.net)), a boisterous, youth-oriented marketing blitz meant to create a buzz among Japan's trendsetters which will help Swedes market their fashion, music, design and art to the country's insatiable consumers. This year it involves some 50 designers, artists, musicians and chefs.

Scandinavia's design ethos has produced economic powerhouses like IKEA, Electrolux, Bang & Olufsen, Lego, Helly Hansen, Nokia, H&M, Volvo and Saab, transforming the region's once stodgy resource-based economy into a global hotbed of style, design and information technology.

"If there is an interesting new design in Europe, it's front page news," says Niels Bendtsen, owner of the highly successful modern furniture manufacturer Bensen and high-end furnishing store Inform in Vancouver. Bendtsen, who moved to Canada from Denmark when he was eight years old, says there just isn't that level of appreciation or understanding for design in Canada—not yet anyway—and the government has done little to nurture it. "Kids in kindergarten in Denmark grow up sitting on Aalto chairs," he says. "It's an inbred thing."

Indeed, Ottawa cut funding for Design Canada, an industry association, in 1989 and more recently the Canadian Craft and Design Museum in Vancouver closed in May because of a lack of public and government support. With an unappreciative public unwilling to pay top dollar for good design, upstart studios across Canada have been forced to survive by going global. Ignored at home, Canadian design is now pulling in kudos abroad.

At New York's International Contemporary Furniture Fair (ICFF), Edmonton's Pure Design picked up the award for best furniture collection in 2001, and Toronto's Lolah took top honours this year. Another Canadian studio, Gus, also won best collection at New York's International Gift Fair in August.

"What's with you Canadians? Why is there such great stuff coming out of Canada? That is a comment we hear all the time," says Hawthorn, who's been attending the ICFF and the Tokyo Designer's Week with her partner Studer for the past several years. Indeed, it was the Japanese government—not Canadian—who actually sought out This Is It Design's beautifully textured glass tableware and wooed them to a Tokyo trade show in 1997.

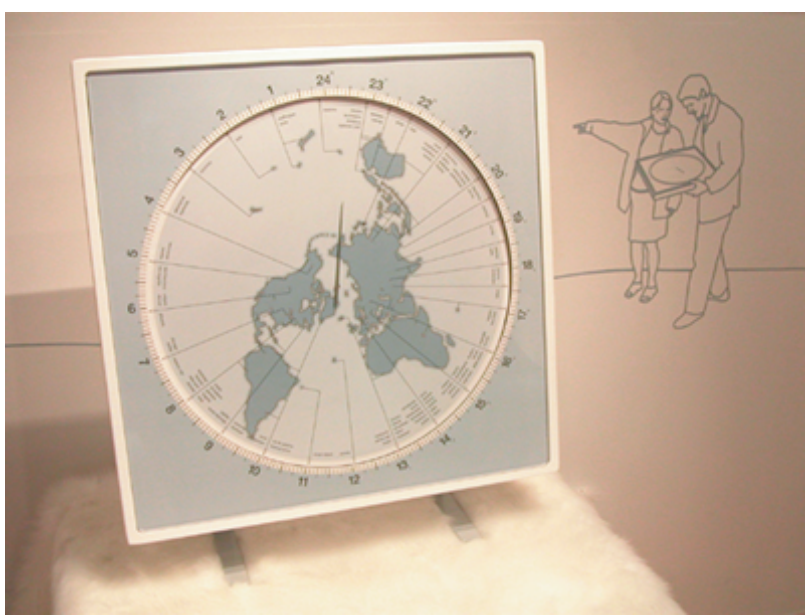
Hot Canadian design is something the world is discovering haphazardly. "The Canadian identity is invisible... We don't have a Canadian collective identity [at the international design shows] as compared to other countries like the Italians or Swedes or French," Studer explains.

"We should somehow band together," says Victor Chan who debuted his Perf series at the ICFF this year. "We're kind of scattered all over the place. If we could somehow group ourselves in one area the impact would be greater."

The phrase "critical mass" is now being bandied about in Canada's design community. Since the recession of the early 1990s, employment in design services, which includes landscape, interior, industrial and graphic design, has soared over 50% to 49,500 in 2000 with revenues of \$1.6 billion. There's a growing cadre of young, aggressive, globally minded designers who could potentially turn Canada, as was mentioned in the Globe last weekend, into the "Denmark of North America."

A snowballing effect—to use a stereotypically Canadian metaphor—is now happening with a growing number of Canadian design exhibitions abroad. The Design Exchange is currently sponsoring a furniture exhibition at Canada House in London as part of 100% Design, Britain's top contemporary design show. There's also a plan to move it to Milan in April for the Salone Internazionale del Mobile, Europe's largest furniture trade fair. Heritage Minister Sheila Copps has announced Trade Routes, a \$32 million program, to promote arts and cultural exports, which includes industrial design. The embassy in Tokyo held a Think Canada 2001 cultural festival last year. And now there's the Majiska? exhibit during the Tokyo Designer's Week.

After the exhibit's opening, Hawthorn and Studer went to the fashionable Daikanyama district to scope out what's hot this season. "We saw a number of strong references to Canadiana," Hawthorn says. One youth-oriented boutique was displaying red and green plaid woollen logging jacks, Kodiak work boots, tuques and mitts with Canada Goose and Made in Canada tags. "It may be the next fashion trend," she adds. The CBC's Red Green as Tokyo's next uber-chic maven? She must be joking. Majiska?



This Is It Design partner Robert Studer's Worldclock, which will be selling in Bloomingdale's Christmas catalogue for about \$1400.



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