

Illustrator Hedof reveals how he took over China with his playful art

Interview with Rick Berkelmans, the man behind some of China's gaudiest strollers and playgrounds.

A lot of European artists and studios are looking to the East these days, it seems. Dan Woodger for example has been nailing it with McDonald's Japan and Samsung Taiwan, while agencies and studios like Pocko and Nexus have both launched Japanese branches in the last year.

While their projects are very much focused on branding big corporations and hip adult lines, Dutch vector maker Rick Berkelmans (aka Hedof) has instead been making his mark on Chinese projects all about the kids (with a few South Korean installations for good measure.)

Strollers, play areas, even Chinese soft drinks have been blessed by Hedof's cute faces and jigsaw-like character constructions, and in this interview we explore how he's managed to master this branding niche, and how it compares with his work in the Western realm.

Welcome to the wonderful world of Hedof, everyone.

Who are you Hedof (or should I say Rick?)

"My name is Rick Berkelmans, I am an illustrator from the Netherlands

“For the past decade I have been working as a commercial artist with brands and clients from all over the world on exciting projects in the fields of advertising, design, editorial, murals, installations, packaging, you name it, all in a very recognisable style: a thoughtful, well-balanced composition full of candy coloured sceneries, suspicious looking characters and wonky shapes, all blending into one another.”

When did you realise illustration could be about so much more than

editorial and the usual packaging?

“When I was in art school, all I knew was children’s books or editorial illustration; nothing wrong with those categories of course, but illustration is just *soooo* much more.

“I think I always have been very aware of this but I guess the fact that I do a lot of these product design collaborations is the result of having a bold style that really stands out – but which is also easy for clients to work with.

“It just feels very contemporary and the more of these collaborations I do, the more interest seems to generate amongst other clients as well.”

How do you like designing for bottles, and what tips should artists know for this field? You've done everything from Nestle to beers like Heineken and Estrella.

"Hahaha wow, I'd never noticed I did so many drink related commissions. Ehmm, I have no idea to be honest.

"Like I said, my work is just very outspoken, bright and positive and I guess this really suits a lot of those type of products and the atmosphere of drinking, fruit, party, festivity etc. So my advice would be know what your style is, and find opportunities to express this. So for example the hallmarks that I just described can also apply to music festivals, so that is why I've also done quite a few music festival identities as well."

Your bottle art for Chinese brand Nayuki (below) is an example of the cutesy packaging found in the Far East. Should illustrators be looking to the East for more work? And how fun is it to do?

“I did a winter campaign three years ago for Lotte World Mall in Seoul (below), and that opened up so many opportunities for me in China.

“This market is just so booming and because of this they are looking for experienced designers to collaborate with. So I was approached to do more shopping mall campaigns and installations and other projects as well.

“I really admire and respect their work ethic and energy and yes, sometimes this can get a little bit out of control in terms of scale of the project. But I am loving every minute of it and I feel very honoured and lucky to be part of this.

“So yes, I reckon there is a huge market in China and other Asian countries and I want to encourage both western and also local illustrators to tap into that and create an awesome global creative scene together.”

How did you come about illustrating

strollers for China's Goodbaby? And how challenging was this project?

"I was approached by China Calling, a young agency based in both the Netherlands and China to work on the Goodbaby 30th anniversary campaign. They asked me to design two big key visuals that they can use in various ways on a range of their products, like strollers, cars seats, clothing, etc.

'But since they asked for a pattern, my initial sketches were very much 'traditional', like separate items combined as a pattern. But they said no, just go wild and do it your way: make a big complex illustration for us to apply in a more modern and abstract way.

“I really like this approach and the result is looking really cool. You now just see a certain vibe, instead of a clear illustration, which in my opinion looks way cooler.”

Would these designs work on the cool calm Dutch streets?

“Even though the illustration and characters might look cute or *kawaii*, it doesn't really matter anymore. It's just an abstract mash of forms, characters and colour in my visual language.”

Your Raffles City Chongqing installation is another kid-focused brief, and I wonder if you feel a difference when designing for kids as opposed to adults?

“Well, I think the key is not to draw kids. That is the worst!

“I think my work is very universal, it still looks cool and I can do a festival identity for example, or work on a serious campaign with Pentagram for the city of Toronto, but also design a kids playground or streetwear clothing collection.

“It is all the same language but within that you can chose different words, tone of voice and intonation. So overall I am just a very positive and playful guy I guess and everything within that field I can bend my work to.

“But yes, working on projects for kids is always a very tricky thing to do because I want my illustration work to stay mature and sophisticated enough to keep working on other projects as well.”

What influences you?

“I am very much influenced by character design in general. My studio is filled with silly looking toys that inspire me a lot. But I think nature in general is my biggest source of inspiration. I mean, the spectrum of animals and plants is just endless and I really love how every part of nature has its own feeling and personality.”

What tools do you use in your process?

“I always start out with pencil and paper. I have searched

long and hard for the right kind but for the past few years I am always using a refillable lead/mechanical pencil (I am always amazed I can take these things with me on a plane...) and decent quality paper, like Navigator.

“After a lot of sketching and tracing on my light box I have what I want and scan in the result and start tracing the design in Adobe Illustrator on my 24” Wacom Cintiq Pro.

“I also play around in Procreate on my iPad pro every now and then but for serious work I always use my Wacom; I love this device and can’t imagine working without it. I hear a lot of illustrators working completely on iPad these days but I just need a bigger surface to work on and I really want the heavy programmes like Illustrator and Photoshop to deliver sharp

high-res work.”

How have you mastered the art of interlocking vectors like jigsaw pieces, making one cohesive whole?

“Haha, well the first seven or eight years of my career, everything was hand-drawn, and I just loved to trace and trace on a light box until I had the smart design I was looking for.

“After that I scanned in my very clean line drawing and started erasing all the lines in Photoshop, turning the spaces in-between into colour shapes. Everybody thought my work was vectors but I just didn’t know how to use Illustrator.

“Then, for the Lotte World Mall project I had to deliver the final piece in vectors because of the 27 meter high size of the design, so I just practiced and taught myself how to do it. But the precious seven years of drawing experience had clearly left a mark. Even though I am getting better and better in Adobe illustrator with the help of my Wacom and a few plugins, I still recommend starting with your hands, pen and paper.”

What would you like to try next in 2020?

“I am really happy with how things are going at the moment, so please more of this. But other than that I am always dreaming about creating my own toy, so hopefully this can finally happen.”

We'd buy one!

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