

FOUNDER OF HANS TAN STUDIO

# HANS TAN

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WERE IT NOT for a pamphlet for an industrial design course that slipped out of a National University of Singapore (NUS) prospectus, Hans Tan would have stuck to his intended route of business study and perhaps walked away with a Businessman of the Year award.

Instead, he has just received a different honour – Designer of the Year – at this year’s President’s Design Awards. This comes after Mr Tan received Design of the Year awards in 2015 for his Pour table and in 2012, for his Spotted Nyonya collection of vessels. The President’s Design Award is the nation’s highest accolade for design.

The Designer of the Year award is the latest in a long list of accolades showered upon him. In 2009, Mr Tan was named by Korean magazine *Designnet* as one of 36 Young Asian Designers, and was a winner of the Martell Rising Personalities Award 2009, which honours individuals from different creative fields who dare to push beyond the boundaries of success.

Mr Tan graduated from NUS with a Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Industrial Design in 2005 and, two years later, graduated *cum laude* from the Design Academy Eindhoven in The Netherlands.

His works, which blur the lines between design, craft and art, are held in private collections, as well as in public permanent collections at the National Collection of Singapore; M+ Museum for Visual Culture, Hong Kong; and the Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum, New York.

Since 2007, he has been running his eponymous studio. Mr Tan, 38, is also an assistant professor, division of industrial design, NUS. His award-winning track record is not limited to his works. He is also a three-time winner of the Annual Excellent Teaching Award from NUS.

## **You were accepted to study business, but then switched to an industrial design course. Why did you do that?**

As a child, I was bad at art and drawing. I still am. I’ve always wanted to study business, but somehow had the epiphany to switch to industrial design. When I saw the flyer for the industrial design course, it covered three things – engineering, business and design. I was good at accounting in junior college and my favourite subject was physics in secondary

school, so I felt I would do well in two out of three areas. It was only during the industrial design course that I learnt about design. It opened my eyes to a way of scoring marks without having to do things academically.

## **What’s your role as a designer?**

I see design as a medium to communicate a new perspective, be it about everyday life, or the Singapore narrative. The idea that I can use design to tell a story about our identity really appeals to me. Some people see design as a means to an end. But I feel that design as a communication tool is meaningful as it has the ability to reach a wider audience. Everyone relates to design; by that I mean everyone can appreciate a beautiful bowl or chair. Art has a function of communication too, but it is more abstract, and you need prior knowledge to understand it. Design is more accessible to the masses.

## **Do you have a design style?**

I wouldn’t say I have a style, but what I consistently tackle in my works is Singapore’s heritage. That’s always a common chain of thought in what I produce. I have an interest in our heritage, because I have direct access to it, and I’m part of it. This is also a reason why I chose to move back to Singapore after doing my masters, even though I had offers to stay on in the Netherlands. Being in Singapore, I can respond to questions about what makes our country the way it is, which I answer through design.

## **When it comes to objects, is there such a thing as Singapore design?**

My honest answer is that anything designed by a Singaporean is a Singapore design. But the Singaporean design identity is only something that you can see in retrospect. It is difficult to define, although industrial design in Singapore has been burgeoning in the last 10 to 15 years. Perhaps in five more years, we can get a better sense of the Singaporean product. Compared with our architecture, industrial design is still very young in Singapore.

## **These days, most design graduates end up working for someone else. But you started your studio immediately after graduation.**

I was part of the generation where design opportunities in big companies were hard to come by. On hindsight,

that was a good thing, because many independent designers started doing things on their own. Now the design scene is quite open, and many organisations are big on design. I would say that our graduates have an easier time getting jobs that are pretty well-paying. Back then, I had to find my own way and sometimes you just had to do it on your own.

## **Can you make a living as a designer?**

For the first two years when I started my studio, I was financially poor. I even had to decide if it was more worth it spending money on chicken rice or economical rice. But I was extremely rich in experience, being influenced by the design and art scene here and trying to find my own voice. That was a beautiful period, supported somehow by people around me and with no savings. I gave myself two years. If the studio didn’t work out, I would find a job. I got offers to teach part-time, and got the chance to combine what I wanted to do as a designer with my passion for teaching. I wanted to pass on what I learnt at Design Academy. Teaching is similar to designing. I choreograph an activity, so that when students go through it they learn, and they practise what they’ve learnt. It is unlike the more traditional route, where it is about mentorship.

I’ve been teaching for nine years. I do two full-time jobs – designing and teaching. Teaching has given me the financial backing to open up my studio to do more works. I’m now at the stage where all the money that I earn from the studio is used for experiments and projects, while teaching sustains the family.

## **Is enough being done for Singaporean designers like yourself?**

The DesignSingapore Council has played a tremendous role in improving the design scene, with scholarships and businesses opportunities. However, there is one thing I feel that can be improved. We tend to see design as an economic driver. In many other countries, design is a part of art. One way to push Singapore design further is to start seeing design as a cultural driver rather than an economic one. If we can get design to be more culturally driven, we can get people to appreciate their culture more. Perhaps we could have a design museum. When we display design outside of a shopfront, we will see design differently, and not just an item to be sold. It’s the same with stamps; have them in a museum and we see them as part of history and culture.



