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Polka players

We're dotty about this Viennese design duo

Vienna recently held its second annual Design Week, and many say it deserved a standing ovation. While the international conference was a big draw, it was the small shows by Austrian designers, held in the nooks and crannies of the romantic capital, that won the hearts of the visitors. Among these was an exhibition by Polka, a product and furniture design collaboration set up by Monica Singer and Marie Rahm in 2004 when they graduated from Vienna's University of Applied Arts. They held their show in the Muehlbauer hat shop in the centre of the city – but, as we found when we met them, the innovative pair are determined not to let success go to their heads...



What was the starting point for Polka?
We launched at the beginning of 2004, when we decided to exhibit our 'Tattoo' furniture at the Salone Satellite show in Milan. We had found this amazing tattooist who was embellished from head to foot and, with him, we developed our concept of tattooed leather furniture. We thought the result was interesting and we liked the way it questioned established cultural ideas about the decoration of surfaces.

Is challenging cultural conventions something you like to do?
In this case, we both loved the idea of combining two contradictory worlds: on the one hand, the seedy, dirty, rock 'n' roll world of tattoos and, on the other hand, the conservative, conventional world of leather furniture. This idea of combining a visual culture with furniture is certainly something we have continued to explore. But it is not the only aspect of our work...

What are the other aspects?
We try to inject an element of humour into what we do – something unexpected, perhaps. Looking at objects in a different light can be a good way of sparking ideas and provoking new reactions.

How did your latest project, 'Polka Pots', come about?

The range of cooking pots were created in collaboration with enamel cookware company Riess. It's a traditional Austrian brand, one that you might associate with your grandmother – our grandmothers certainly possess Riess pots and pans. We met the head of the company during last year's Vienna Design Week and they put forward the idea of creating a range.

Do you intend to do more pots, perhaps for mass production?
We're happy for any more proposals and big projects – but we're also very aware of our image. We've done a lot of tableware and feel it's easy for us, as two women, to

SPOT ON
Monica Singer (left) and Marie Rahm with some of their creations – the 'Alma' chair for Wittman, a 'Polka Pot' designed in collaboration with Riess, and the 'Josephine' carafe with drinking glass for Lobmeyr

get pigeonholed as 'girls that just make small, pretty things'. We'd like to do more furniture and bigger pieces.

Do you think that your gender has ever stood in your way in other areas?

It's not really ever been a struggle... In fact, if anything, it's been a great strength. However, you have to be aware of the image you create – everyone does. Perception is key.

Do you intend to stay in Vienna?

I think so – we're very happy here for now. Vienna seems to have woken from a great design sleep during the past two years and become a very lively place. Plus, it's an ideal European base – close to everything and with an airport that has, apparently, the fewest delays of any in the world.

What's your next goal?

We want to give product pleasure (that's our mantra) and just to keep on doing what we're doing. ★

www.polkaproducts.com