

STRAPS FOR CASH

Serving as both chairwoman and creative director of her own hugely successful lingerie business, Marlies Dekkers reveals why she was voted the Dutch Veuve Clicquot Business Woman of the Year.

BUSINESSWOMAN, LINGERIE DESIGNER, ARTIST, AUTHOR AND single mother, Marlies Dekkers has displayed a rare combination of skills in her rise to the top of the fashion industry. Blending solid business acumen with her more rebellious, artistic sensibilities, she has long been something of an enigma. But the contrasting sides of her achievements were recognised earlier this year when she picked up the Contours International Lingerie Award (CILA) for her artistic accomplishments, followed by the International Prix Veuve Clicquot Business Woman of the Year for her business achievements.

Yet things have not always been as rosy for 41-year-old Dekkers. Born and raised in the Netherlands in the largely Catholic province of Brabant, she had to tear herself away from her conservative working-class roots and scrap her way to the top. Recently divorced, she now raises her nine-year-old daughter Zilver as a single mum, but, she says, "I don't feel like a single mother at all. That's because Zilver's father and I jointly raise our daughter – with the help of a good nanny! I ensure quality time with Zilver and we share special moments."

Childhood seems to be important to her, and she claims to have discovered her penchant for underwear at an early age: "I have always been fascinated with lingerie, even as a child. It is hidden under your clothes, so secret, so very private," she once said. Today, her provocative creations retain an element of that demure teasing, but are also heavily influenced by her own eccentricity and excess. Attending the St Joost Academy of Art in Breda, for example, she

ENTREPRENEUR AND
DESIGNER MARLIES DEKKERS



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THE MARLIES DEKKERS BOUTIQUE IN AMSTERDAM



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apparently turned up to her graduation ceremony wearing a bottom-exposing dress that she had designed specially for the occasion.

Driven by her passion for lingerie and funded by a €16,000 (£11,000) government grant, Dekkers established her first business in 1993. Her first lingerie line, known as Undressed, was sold to department stores such as the French Galeries Lafayette and Dutch De Bijenkorf, and she knew from the start the importance of standing out from the competition. “When I launched my first collection I tried to bring something new to the market,

“Expansion and financial risk go hand-in-hand. I’ve found a way to cope with risk and still get enough sleep. I use the courage success brings to deal with the next risk.”

instead of competing with existing brands,” she says. Thirteen years later, her tactics appear to have worked. Her underwear is available in over 1,000 retail outlets in 18 countries, and there are Marlies Dekkers boutiques in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Maastricht, Antwerp, Paris and Bangkok.

At the Waldorf Astoria, where she picked up her CILA, Dekkers left several well-known brands and finalists – including Kenzo, Lejaby, Lise Charmel and Nina Ricci – empty-handed. She also won the Dutch Bodyfashion Award in 1994, as well as ELLE’s Innovator of the Year Award in 2004, and the Grand Seigneur the following year. Serving as the chairwoman of the Marlies Dekkers Group as well as its creative director, she can be sure that her rapidly growing business remains firmly under her control.

Her garments were initially made in a small Belgian textile factory, but by 1998 demand was outstripping supply and Dekkers switched production to Hong Kong-based Ace Style Intimate Apparel, one of the best textile manufacturers in the world. This increased capacity allowed her to expand, but by 2004 her collection had begun to look tired and lower-end chains were copying her designs. “It’s part of the deal when you have your own business and take risks. What’s important is how you deal with it.” Such a pragmatic approach helps explain how she has built such a successful empire – and managed to do it while maintaining her other interests.

“Expansion and financial risk go hand-in-hand,” she says. “I have found a way to cope with risk and still get enough sleep. I simply use the courage success brings to deal with the next financial risk.” And like every good entrepreneur, Dekkers says doubts are essential. “If you never have doubts, you’ll never be creative either. As an entrepreneur, it is more important to have guts and daring, and be willing to take risks.” Today she recognises that



THE CONNECTION COLLECTION – INFLUENCED, DEKKERS SAYS, BY THE ARCHITECTURE OF CABLE BRIDGES.



THE PUNKCHARM COLLECTION – “A NOSTALGIC LOOK AT LONDON’S EARLY PUNK SCENE”.

© Carrin Verbruggen

“Work is my relaxation, a key to my success. Then once you fulfil your dreams, you stop considering your job work. And a passion for work makes it easier to balance your working and personal life.”

keeping the product fresh is just as important as building the business and diversifying further, and she devotes a large proportion of her time to creating the clothes. “I design seven new collections a year – a big challenge,” she boasts, with a hint of deliberate understatement. “I would like to reach the very top and have at least one of my own boutiques in every world capital. I’m already on my way – with the right company, formula and product in place.”

A tough businesswoman, she’s realistic about the responsibilities required of her. “To lead an international company you have to be a pit bull terrier. Thankfully, I’ve found a way to be a charming one!” Indeed, she used her acceptance speech at the Prix Clicquot award ceremony to call for what she termed a more womanlike and intuitive way of conducting business and handling staff. “Learn from them, listen to them and take them seriously,” she advises. “Recognise their talents, provide good coaching, put a halt to macho behaviour and pay special attention to the qualities of curiosity and surprise.”

She is something of a champion of women in the workplace, and it comes as no surprise

that of the 125 people who work directly for her, 80 per cent are women. In addition to being an honour, the Prix Clicquot also allows her “to bring this female style of doing business into the spotlight”. Reflecting on her own achievements, Dekkers offers women some advice: “Don’t just dream it, be it!” And to entrepreneurs everywhere, she says: “Don’t be afraid to repeat things; be prepared to be disciplined and to work hard; and be passionate about your product.”

It’s sound advice, but it’s only part of the story. For like many entrepreneurs, Dekkers does not draw a line between business and pleasure: “Work is my relaxation, a key to my success. Once you fulfil your dreams, you stop considering your job work. And a passion for work makes it easier to balance your working and personal life.”

She names Picasso, Fassbinder, Warhol and Lichtenstein as a few of the inspirations in her work, and the influence of these artists may go some way to explaining why her creations themselves, although functionally designed, have been considered art by some. In addition to the famous Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, her lingerie has been exhibited in both the Kunsthall and



MARLIES DEKKERS RECEIVES THE VEUVE CLICQUOT BUSINESS WOMAN OF THE YEAR AWARD

Schielandshuis in Rotterdam, and the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels.

And her artistic aspirations do not stop there. Apparently not content with an already full life, she recently joined forces with controversial Dutch novelist and columnist Heleen van Royen to write a book “purely to find out how women think about the things they cherish, like power, success and sexuality”. Already a bestseller with over 100,000 copies sold, *Stout* (the Dutch title translates to ‘naughty’ in English) also covers lingerie and eroticism. It’s not the stuff of business school textbooks, but then Marlies Dekkers could never have been called conventional. 