

FOC Grand Prix Design 2013: encomium for Martin Leuthold

My dear Martin Leuthold,
prizewinners and guests

Originally, as you might expect in the St. Gallen region, the Jakob Schlaepfer company was an embroidery business, although it is now one of the world's best-known fabric manufacturers. It is prized for its innovative designs using techniques invented in-house. Besides printing and embroidery, textiles are also lasered, glued, cut and crumpled – sometimes all at once. The materials used range from silk to aluminium, and the finished product dazzles with its exquisite quality and breathtaking beauty.

I am not heaping exuberant praise on these fabrics just for the sake of it. It really is true. It is nevertheless worth taking a closer look at their properties, finding out about their origins and discovering how nothing is left to chance in their creation, how they are the product not of a clever and carefully thought-out business plan but of a painstaking process that cannot take place overnight.

Hidden away at the heart of Jakob Schlaepfer is a textile research laboratory, where inventors, mad scientists and nerds come up with new ideas and experiment with alternative techniques and products. It is rather like a secret NASA facility out in the desert, far away from prying eyes. (I am not saying that St. Gallen is a desert, of course, but it is hardly the centre of the fashion world!) This lab is where the inventor and designer Martin Leuthold works. He is still the company's Creative Director today.

His career makes me aware of how much highly creative design depends on the designer's personality. The key aspects here are the designer's relationship to his design, how he deals with changes and his feeling for taking things in the right direction.

However, Martin is not just responsible for fabric ideas, he is in charge of the entire creative process behind the collection, right up to the launch of a marketable product for the international fashion industry.

It is to Schlaepfer's credit that he gave Martin this freedom and responsibility, and it is in turn to Martin's credit that he takes them so seriously and makes the most of them creatively.

Martin's fabric creations are shaped by his design philosophy and his intuition. This may sound somewhat eccentric, but in fact his openness towards others and towards new ideas also influences his designs.

This can also be seen within his design team. He provides input and accords freedom, but he also gives his staff responsibility and trust. This magnanimous approach is based on mutuality: he influences, but he allows himself to be influenced as well. He is never weary of new designers and trends. Instead, he sees them as a challenge, one he responds to with yet more textile experiments.

He knows how important it is in the fast-moving world of fashion to drop ideas quickly and dare to start again. The ever-changing fashion landscape contrasts sharply with the rural scenery surrounding his farmhouse, and this opposition is a feature of his design philosophy.

It is precisely this familiar, down-to-earth environment that allows Martin to cast a broad creative net. He is accustomed to St. Gallen, where he went to school and university, and where he still lives to this day.

What starts with familiarity ends up producing ground-breaking fabrics. Martin thus creates from continuity.

Martin joined Jakob Schlaepfer when he was 20 years old. He did not set out to turn the company on its head. On the contrary, he admired his older colleagues, was in awe of their skills and allowed this to spur his own creative output.

Today, all these years later, he is amazed by the know-how and creativity of his young team and puts these strengths to good use in his fabrics. You might say that they are spontaneous designs that result from years of preparation.

This is why he is held in such high esteem at home as well as on the international fashion scene. He often serves as a point of reference for a whole generation of young, Swiss designers, and this is something that is both very important and virtually unique throughout the Swiss textiles industry.

Never aloof, he lets young designers come through, and he also lets them go again. He does not fear change, which I believe is quite a rare quality in a boss!

As a design student, it is very inspiring and vital to be around you, Martin. I have been in that position myself. Your influence continues to be felt in the careers of the latest newcomers. Not as a leader, but as a distinct, personal presence, someone who shares, discusses, coaches and is always receptive.

We are very lucky to have you. You show us how such contrasting notions as freedom and responsibility, tradition and innovation, familiarity and the unknown, commerce and creativity can feed off each other. All of these opposites are part of the personal story you tell with your fabric creations, sent out from St. Gallen all around the globe.

The Federal Office of Culture would like to offer you its warmest congratulations on being awarded the Grand Prix Design.

Christoph Hefti, Federal Design Commission, June 2013