

# Redefining the concept of design

A bold mindset and a gutsy move helped DesignSingapore scholar Hans Tan become one of Singapore's most high-profile industrial designers

TEXT BY SHAMILEE VELLU

You could say a brochure changed Mr Hans Tan's life. Mr Tan, whose father was an accountant, enjoyed working with numbers as well and had enrolled to study business. It seemed his future career was well on track – until a flyer on industrial design slipped out of a National University of Singapore (NUS) prospectus that he had been browsing during his National Service.

"It was a leap of faith because I did not know what design was at the time," says the 41-year-old, whose decision to change courses was partly motivated by an openness to explore alternative careers that were not deskbound.

It was also unexpected because he says he could not – and still cannot – draw. Fortunately, his mentors at NUS told him he did not need to draw

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MR HANS TAN  
recipient of the DesignSingapore Scholarship

▲ Designer Hans Tan is not only the founder of Hans Tan Studio, but he is also an associate professor at the Division of Industrial Design at NUS. PHOTO: FRENCHESCAR LIM

well to be a good designer as "design is much more than that".

His wise mentors were right. Today, Mr Tan, who established his eponymous studio in 2005, is a three-time recipient of the President's Design Award, Singapore's highest design accolade.

He is widely known for his playfully creative works such as Spotted Nyonya, a collection of ceramic vessels inspired by Peranakan motifs, as well as Pour, a side table with candy-pop-hued pools of resin inspired by kueh lapis sagu, a traditional Malay steamed pastry.

His ability to work with "conventional" mediums like ceramics and resin was sparked at the prestigious Design Academy Eindhoven in The Netherlands, where he did a two-year master's degree after graduating from NUS. He was able to pursue postgraduate studies overseas because of the DesignSingapore Scholarship. He received the scholarship in 2005, the first year it was introduced. The scholarship allowed him to attend a pioneering school that was "leading the charge for redefining design" and learn from design maestros such as Gijs Bakker, founder of product and exhibition design outfit Droog Design.

## GOING BEYOND DESIGN

Apart from his commercial work, Mr Tan is also an associate professor at the Division of Industrial Design at NUS, where he has received teaching awards such as the Outstanding Educator Award.

He not only guided students toward a deeper understanding of design's many facets, but he also taught them soft skills that extend beyond the classroom.

"On the first day of school, I always ask my first-year students what is their biggest fear when it comes to pursuing industrial design. The most common response is fear of failure," he says.

Mr Tan's first piece of advice for students is to learn the difference between self-doubt and "idea doubt", a concept he learnt from American author Adam Grant.

"While conflating your work with your self-worth can be harmful, constantly questioning your ideas helps you to become very productive – it pushes you to do better," he explains.

"The second piece of advice I give my students is, learn to be comfortable with failure because it is the best way to learn. Design is all about iteration and prototyping. You make something, test it, learn from the unsuccessful parts and iterate from there. You may not always get things right the first time – and as we all know, this also applies to everything in life."

■ Visit <https://bit.ly/DsgScholarship> for more information.