

Oona Scheepers: SA's auto design export

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Originally from a farm in Prieska, Oona Scheepers harboured a keen interest for art and design from a young age. This interest, coupled with raw talent and an inescapable attention to detail, would eventually lead Scheepers into her role as a respected interior designer at multinational automotive company Volkswagen Group, headquartered in Wolfsburg, Germany.



Oona Scheepers

We were lucky enough to grab an interview with Scheepers on her recent visit to South Africa. Her love for her job and appreciation for those she works alongside was tangible. Here, she shares her personal story and offers insight into the nuances of automotive design.

Firstly, what does your role entail?

Oona Scheepers: There are three main fields in the design of a motor vehicle: exterior, interior and classically designed colour and trim. I'm responsible for this third part. I work very closely with the interior and exterior designer in deciding the complete colour palettes for the cars, the body paints and all the bumper parts that need to work with the body colour. This includes elements like the finishes used on exhaust pipes and the wheels.

Inside the car, I'm responsible for the headliner all the way down to the carpet. I make material and fabrication choices to ensure design is harmonious and results in an attractive, intact interior in every single one of our cars.

■ Tell us about your path to design.

Scheepers: I was born in Prieska in the Northern Cape in the middle of nowhere. I attended high school in Stellenbosch where I was able to study art, which was a big bonus for me. As a kid I always knew that I was going to do something in an art direction. I then studied design at the Cape Technikon in Cape Town. The move abroad was definitely linked to automotive.

As the car industry in South Africa stands, yes South Africa manufactures, but one definitely isn't in any position to make the key decisions and that's what I wanted to do. There's a lot happening in that direction though. We're increasingly looking into local content. Even though European and South African tastes are closely aligned, there are some differences. We're investigating ways to cater to that and achieve an ideal balance. It will give the local market a lot more responsibility.

■ Were you particularly drawn to cars in your early life?

Scheepers: When I was younger, a car was solely for transportation. I only got into cars once I got married. My husband is a car freak and every night there used to be a group of guys in our flat until the early hours of the morning talking about cars. It was frustrating because I couldn't really join in on the conversation. So in the end I made a decision: if you can't beat them, join them. I started to take a closer look and once it caught on, I was hooked.

Now I just love cars. I love going out on vehicle tests and I love being part of the design team. It's such an awesome product to work on in all its complexity and diversity, from the little VW Up vehicle to the massive Scania and MAN monster trucks. In the VW Group we have a close network of designers in the same field as I am. The different nationalities and cultures... there are so many different aspects just on the side of automotive design that makes it really exciting.



Porsche Carrera GT design team

▣ *What are the challenges of the job?*

Scheepers: One of the big challenges of the job is that tastes differ. European taste is very different to what's trendy in China, which is very different to what's happening in America. South Africa tends to take after Europe in this regard. To keep such a diverse range of customers happy we try and get as close to the market as we can while still retaining our identity. One's corporate identity needs to stay very strong, but we are starting to open up on certain colour issues because the variation in the markets calls for it.

There's always competition in the automotive industry, but it's always really fair. We appreciate all brands, all cars and we know we're all in it for the same challenge.

▣ *Are there many women in automotive design?*

Scheepers: If you look at automotive design in total, then no. In the field that I'm working in, then yes. If you're looking at the colours, materials and the balance of harmonious components inside the vehicle, there's quite a lot of women involved. At Audi, for example, there's 100% women in the colour and trim department. At VW we have about 60% women and 40% men. I fight for the men to be in my department because I think it keeps a perfect balance.

▣ *Yes, women tend to enjoy the details don't they?*

Scheepers: That's actually one of my problems. If you pulled up a car in front of me I would get in and immediately start looking at the details. It can spoil the experience sometimes. It's not something I can switch off.

▣ *Would you say VW vehicles adhere to a similar design aesthetic?*

Scheepers: To stay true to our roots, we have a design DNA which we always keep in mind. We've grown over many years and there are certain core essentials that need to be adhered to in order to retain our identity.

It's such a large international company, which is one of the things I love most about Volkswagen: its global presence. Mixing with the different cultures is so rewarding and refreshing. You can use nationalism in such a positive way. We have a plant in Puebla and I love working with the Mexican people there. The same goes for the plant in Sao Paulo and again when I'm here in South Africa. The Chinese market is exciting. Indian as well. It's just such an interesting and exciting mixture.

▣ *What trends do you predict in automotive manufacturing and design in the coming years?*

Scheepers: On everybody's lips at the moment, including those in South Africa, is the challenge of autonomous driving.

Certain cars, like the latest VW Pasat, are pretty much there already. The rules and regulations, however, are not quite there. Imagine you're approaching a zebra crossing at speed and there's an old lady and a kid crossing the road and the car has to decide which one to avoid. How does it make that decision? Another consideration is how infrastructure will have to adapt to accommodate self-driving cars.

Autonomous driving is a big challenge and a tricky one to navigate. There are a lot of unanswered questions. I think every single motor company in the world at the moment is trying to find the answers.

The VW Group comprises the following brands: Volkswagen, Volkswagen Commercial Vehicles, Audi, Seat, Skoda, Bugatti, Lamborghini, Ducati, Scania, MAN, Bentley, Porsche.

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