



**BETTE**



# Aesthetics, clarity and originality

How can design enhance a brand's profile? We met industrial designer Dominik Tesseraux and Sven Rensinghoff, head of marketing and product management at Bette, to talk about the premium bathroom brand's development – and the importance of courage and consistency.

bette.de

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Photos: Bette und Christof Jakob

*Left: BetteLux Oval Couture is available in the colours ivory, moss, carbon and elephant (as shown left). Above: Tesseraux and Rensinghoff during the interview at the designer's studio.*

The studio is like a blank sheet of paper: white walls, white tables, lots of empty space. Only a few carefully selected *objets trouvés* breathe life into the rooms – things like an old Bang & Olufsen poster or a discarded casting mould. The neat and tidy former carriage house in the centre of Potsdam is home to industrial designer Dominik Tesseraux and his four employees. This is where he creates striking bathroom design for Bette, an owner-managed family company from Delbrück. Talking to Dominik Tesseraux and Sven Rensinghoff, you can't help but notice how attentively the two of them listen and add to each other's thoughts. Even after all these years, they don't seem to have lost their enthusiasm for folded edges and waste fittings. The well-practised team functions like a symbiotic pair to develop ideas for bathroom design.

**Mr Rensinghoff, Mr Tesseraux, you've been collaborating successfully for eight years now. What's the secret of your success?**

*Sven Rensinghoff:* Basically, it's our continuous joint work on the brand and its portfolio that makes the difference. It means we can set ourselves joint goals and motivate each other to keep exploring new avenues.

*Dominik Tesseraux:* Bette doesn't just write a brief and expect you to meet it. And we're not the kind of firm that only follows the brief to the letter anyway. We like to take a more in-depth approach.



Professional symbiosis: product designer Dominik Tesseraux (left) with Sven Rensinghoff, head of marketing and product manager at Bette.

*Rensinghoff:* And that's something we really appreciate. Obviously we have an idea of what we need for our product range. But then you put your minds to how we can take the bathtub, shower or washbasin one step further. It's always worked out excellently over the last few years.

**Bette positions itself as a design-oriented company. What exactly is important to you?**

*Rensinghoff:* Our product design is a great help when it comes to attracting attention and making the brand visible.

*Tesseraux:* It's a very dynamic process. Bette wants to become more international. These days, you can't do that without communicating the brand – and design is an essential part of that.

**Which target groups do you want to appeal to?**

*Rensinghoff:* On the one hand we try to address sanitaryware specialists and architects, but on the other we're stepping

up our efforts to appeal to consumers. The desire to express your style by designing your own four walls in an individual way has now extended to the bathroom. Whereas it's our premium materials, excellent workmanship and reliable service that appeal to fitters, consumers are more likely to focus on the design, flexibility and convenience of our products. And as for architects, they find all those factors appealing.

**What exactly is it that makes the Bette brand different?**

*Tesseraux:* Bette always respects the context – the interior design and the architecture. Plus I get the feeling that the target groups find the brand likeable. Nowadays we're all supposed to work even more and be even faster – even though that's not actually good for anybody. Bette has a different, more down-to-earth attitude. It's not just about profit and speed.

**“The courage to form an independent opinion is definitely something the founder passed on to his son.”**

Sven Rensinghoff

*Rensinghoff:* Sustainability and quality play an essential role in our brand image, and the fact that Bette is an owner-managed family business is a great help in that respect. It means people give us more leeway when it comes to new product developments. We don't have to draw a line under the figures six months down the road to see whether a product is worthwhile. There's a certain degree of freedom in that – it gives you the freedom to decide for or against an attitude, a style or a pace of life.

*Tesseraux:* A lot of decisions are made very emotionally. Thilo Pahl, Bette's managing partner, can get very enthusiastic about concepts – and sets about implementing them immediately. As a result, changes soon make themselves felt.

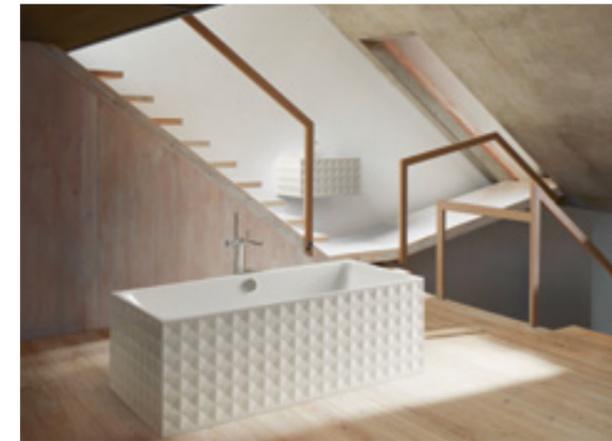
**Is there an overriding concept when it comes to the product range?**

*Tesseraux:* The glazed titanium steel is a connecting element. As compared to other

materials like acrylic it's a relatively expensive material, but most people don't know exactly what glazed steel is or what advantages it offers. For us, it's important for the Bette product portfolio to communicate the quality of the materials.

**So what benefits does the material offer?**

*Rensinghoff:* Its “authentic” surface. The enamel glaze, which is a kind of glass, is harder than marble, plastic or steel. It's also scratchproof, non-porous, UV-resistant and doesn't alter over time. Especially in the shower area, it's good to have a seamless, germ-free surface. We achieve the exceptional evenness of our bathtubs, shower trays and washbasins by means of a wet-in-wet enamelling process that's been perfected over decades. Three ultra-thin layers of our special enamel formula are permanently bonded to the titanium steel carcass in two firing pro-



Top: BetteLux Oval Couture uses fabric and upholstery to translate home comforts into the bathroom. Centre: BetteLoft Ornament owes its expressive exterior to an embossed geometric pattern.





cesses at a temperature of 850C. The resulting natural material combines the malleability of steel with the optical, haptic and hygienic properties of glass. Besides ensuring lightness, its great internal flexibility is responsible for the reliability and durability of the products as well. That's why we're able to offer our customers a 30-year guarantee.

**Bette has been around since 1952. What role does tradition play for the brand?**

*Rensinghoff:* Tradition is important for our communications, especially at international level. But the materials and processes used in the bathroom sector have changed enormously since we first started developing products. Back in the 1960s there were lots of steel tub manufacturers in Germany, whereas nowadays there are just two: Kaldewei and Bette. In the

1970s, the development of acrylic gave rise to a new kind of competition. It made it possible to form shapes that had been unthinkable in steel. So Bette's owners had to make a decision: Shall we switch to acrylic or not? In the end, the quality of glazed steel prevailed – a clever decision. And thanks to the technique we use today, there are a lot more possibilities for shaping the material than there were 25 years ago.

**Has the company's attitude been influenced by that experience?**

*Rensinghoff:* The courage to form an independent opinion is definitely something the founder passed on to his son. Thilo Pahl takes at least as much pleasure in trying out new things and investing in new machinery as his father did.

**Does that make itself felt in Bette's product portfolio?**

**“The natural material titanium steel combines the malleability of steel with the optical, haptic and hygienic properties of glass. Besides ensuring lightness, its great internal flexibility is responsible for the reliability and durability of the products as well.”**

Sven Rensinghoff



*Tesseraux used this presentation to visualise the BetteLoft model – with the aim of bringing the brand's design into clearer focus.*

*Tesseraux:* When we first started working together Bette had a very extensive range. The products had too many details and the design didn't concentrate enough on one theme. So we took the approach – and still do – of having fewer products in the portfolio but making them clearer and more enduring.

**How did Bette react to the criticism at the time?**

*Rensinghoff:* Dominik was right: for our customers, some of the products seemed interchangeable. He made us realise that our product range had to be more multifaceted if we wanted to cover various styles and tastes. Some of our products had been with us for a long time and become icons – at least for us. But

when a model no longer corresponds to requirements or is out of touch with the times, you have to say goodbye.

**Do you take a more strategic approach as a result of your collaboration with Dominik Tesseraux?**

*Rensinghoff:* Yes. But having somebody hold a mirror up to you is definitely a learning process. And that kind of reflection can only enhance a brand's profile long term if it's repeated at regular intervals. It's interesting to see that the successful products are those you under-

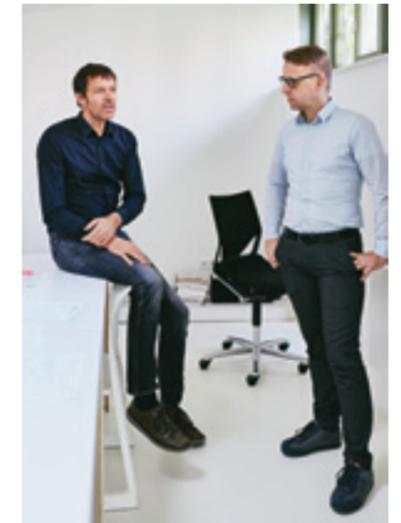
stand at first glance.

**And which products are particularly easy to understand?**

*Rensinghoff:* Either those with a very archetypical design – like the oval Starlet tub – or the models that convey their benefit particularly clearly. Take BetteOcean, for instance, a combined bath and shower: you immediately understand that it's not just comfortable to bath in but that you can shower in it as well. And we'll keep working to make our product strategy even more coherent over the years to come.

*Tesseraux:* There are two opposite directions in the Bette collection. Products like BetteLux Shape are all about the interior; the design – there's an extrovert quality to them. In the high-end architecture segment, for instance, the bathroom is in-

*Reduced to the max: Tesseraux's studio reflects his structured approach and clear-cut attitude to design.*



creasingly merging with the living space, so something like the BetteLux Oval Couture with its cosy, variable fabric covering is ideal. And then there are products that are mainly bought because of their function – things like a shower tray.

**How do these two directions relate to one another?**

*Rensinghoff:* Whereas the “introvert” products are standard, the “extrovert” products help develop the brand – they demonstrate our potential as a design-oriented company. These products shape public perception, especially in new markets where we're not that well known yet. BetteLux Shape and BetteLux Oval Couture reflect a trend: if you're going to have a bathtub, it's got to be a freestanding one! The sales figures in this area have increased over the last 10 years. Even so, freestanding tubs still only account for less than 10% of all tubs sold. But all the same, they're extremely important for the brand because they help us sell the classic, built-in tubs too.

**What kind of products are still missing from the range?**

*Tesseraux:* If I think of cities like Shanghai or New York, we're going to have to meet some very different requirements in terms of the architecture. We need to transfer our design aspirations to products for small bathrooms. Homes are getting smaller – especially in cities. Is there actually still enough space for a tub? Can we come up with an attractively designed and functional solution? In recent years, tubs have disappeared from some bathrooms completely; people are tending to install bigger showers instead. That's the biggest challenge we're facing.

**Has your long, intense collaboration given rise to a consistent design language over the years?**

*Rensinghoff:* Yes. Our design language is an important differentiating feature. The folded edge in itself is enough to tell you you're looking at a Bette tub.

*Tesseraux:* That's why we're trying to take any products with a more arbitrary design out of the portfolio. We're aiming for clarity and elegance; it's perfectly acceptable for a design to be emotional, but there has to be something archetypical and understated about it. The BetteLux tub is a good example: it's a very simple product – but the first thing people do is run their fingers over it and say how nice and soft it is.

*Rensinghoff:* It was the first bath in our range not to have a rim at all. The edge transitions straight into the shape – it's an unexpected element with emotional appeal. That's reflected in the sales figures too: it's become our most successful built-in tub.

*Tesseraux:* We spend a lot of time on the structural side of things; when we're designing, we're always looking for an archetype, an icon, for clarity. And ideally, the design should be straightforward to implement as well.

**Where do you get your ideas when you're working on new themes?**

*Tesseraux:* Young people sit down at the computer and torment the internet. I tell all my staff to leave their devices switched off to start with and use their heads instead. There are some simple things that get on everybody's nerves, but nobody does anything about them. Take the hair traps that are built into showers, for instance: they're not a lot of fun to clean. I'm surprised that nobody's tried to come up with a better solution. A question like that can be the starting point for a new idea. I try to think clearly and ask questions.

*Rensinghoff:* ... like how can a different kind of function be incorporated in the products? How do people use the product, what do they think is missing?

**Various trends have made their way into the bathroom in recent years – things like cosiness, digitalisation and wellness at home. Do things like that play any role for Bette?**

*Rensinghoff:* We deliberately took the cosiness trend to extremes with the fabric covering for the BetteLux Oval Couture tub: basically, we brought the feel of a sofa into the bathroom. Obviously we pay attention to trends, but not all of them yield meaningful approaches for our products. How necessary is digitalisation in the bathroom, for instance? Somebody might want a sound system under the tub or a display on the mirror. But other people see the bathroom as a kind of refuge they can retreat to when they want to switch off. Just think about voice control: do you really want to stand at the washbasin and say “Water on!”?