

Proving Canada has more to offer than maple syrup and moose, a national artists' collective is showcasing our cultural currency with a provocative exhibit at Tokyo's Designer's Week.

Making no apologies

By KEVIN GRIFFIN
in Vancouver

The image of Canada as nothing but mountains, maple syrup and moose is about to get an international makeover.

A group of designers based in Vancouver has formed a team from across the country for an exhibition of innovative Canadian talent at one of the largest design fairs in the world: Tokyo's Designer's Week.

With the cheeky title of *No Apologies Necessary: Design from Canada*, the exhibition will showcase a range of diverse designs and products such as *Haida manga*, an innovative melding of indigenous stories with Japanese-style comics (called *manga*), and a trendy "Grow-Up" table with real, non THC-grass, that you can fit into your downtown condo.

A total of 26 designers -- including 17 from Vancouver -- will have their work on display starting Thursday at the tony Prince Takamado Gallery in the Canadian embassy in Tokyo.

"Canadians aren't known for design," said Beth Hawthorn, one of the Vancouver designers with BARK Design Collective who is responsible for organizing the Tokyo exhibit.

I think we're still perceived as based on logging and mining -- all natural resources. We're not known for anything value-added, or our creativity. In this show, we're saying, 'Hey, we're not apologizing for anything -- this is what Canadian designers are capable of doing.' "

This year's Tokyo Design Week will draw an estimated 1.5 million visitors to numerous events and exhibits from 35 countries. Held annually since 1997, the show has become so popular in Japan, an admittedly style-conscious country where designers are regarded as celebrities, it has been expanded to several weeks and has spread to Osaka and Kyoto.

The Tokyo fair is the biggest design show in Asia and considered the fourth largest in the world behind Milan, Italy, Cologne, Germany and New York.

No Apologies Necessary won't end in Tokyo. Organizers are planning to bring the exhibit to Toronto as well, where it will be displayed at the Design Exchange. It will also be shown at Canada House in London.

The exhibit's catchy name, Hawthorn says, was generated through discussion of Canadian culture by members of the BARK Design Collective.

"We were talking about how we're perceived as boring and polite -- always apologizing if we bump into someone," said Hawthorn, a partner with Robert Studer in the firm called this is it design, which has participated in the Tokyo show for four years.

"And the Japanese -- they're over-polite about everything. We thought that *No Apologies Necessary* spanned both cultures."

No Apologies Necessary -- the first time Canada has organized a countrywide exhibit at the fair -- melds culture and commerce into something Christian Blyt, an associate professor of industrial design at Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, calls "cultural currency."

"What we're saying is just that it's time for us to step on the stage. What are we being so polite about? We're saying we can compete with anyone, anywhere."

Blyt was hired four years ago to teach an industrial design course at Emily Carr called *Innovations in Wood*, a program designed to produce graduates who can add value to the province's raw-wood resources and help develop secondary manufacturing.

He will give a presentation at the Canadian embassy next week pitching Emily Carr -- one of the continent's top design schools -- to Japanese students.

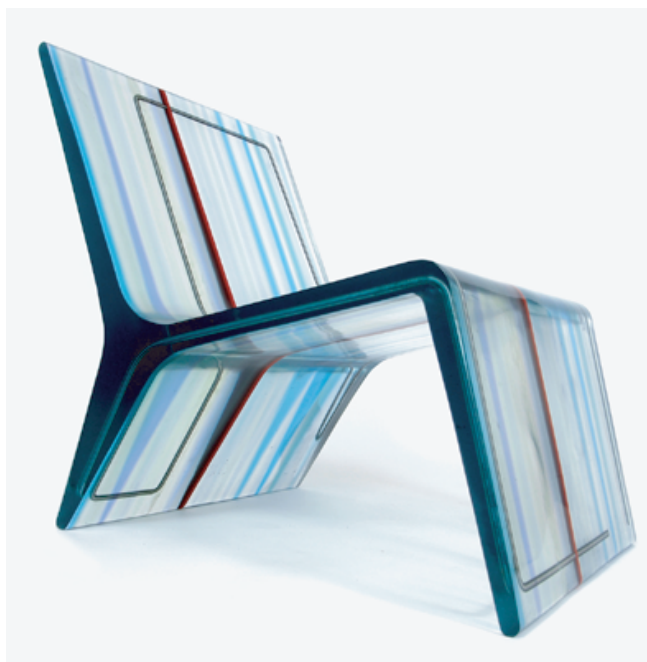
"I don't think we're on the radar screen of a lot of people. Design is not what people think of when they think of Canada. We have to educate and enlighten them," he said.

BARK's budget was originally \$90,000 but was cut to \$50,000, an amount that came from, primarily, the federal Western Economic Diversification Fund.

Among some of the designs being shown in Tokyo are a one-piece, white felt suit and a museum of Extreme Sports precariously balanced on a mountain.

Hawthorn has two pieces in the show: *The Doggie Bag*, a small pet carrier that straps on to your body to allow your hands to be free; and *the Writer's Block*, a cube table made out of Aspen wood, which is an underused, B.C. softwood.

Studer and Seunggun Khan Lee have designed *Hololuma lighting*: uniquely modified fluorescent lighting tubes found in most hardware stores.



2.4 chair by Omer Arbel,
Haida Manga by Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas;
and checkmate vases by Michel Laflamme.