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Review: V&A's Telling Tales show gives furniture a fairytale twist

The museum's summer exhibition invites you into a world of dreamlike design, where chairs, cabinets – even baths – are remade in fantastical new forms

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guardian.co.uk, Friday 17 July 2009 13.46 BST

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Peer a little closer ... Wieki Somers's Bathboat at the V&A. Photograph: Martin Godwin

In the psychologically revealing world of fairytales, familiar domestic items are invested with strange properties: mirrors talk, toys walk and houses can be gobbled up. The lowliest of possessions – rags, tatty slippers and a pumpkin, say – are transformed into glittering objects of desire far beyond the requirements of functionality.

So it's no wonder that the V&A has chosen a fairytale theme for its fabulous new "design art" exhibition, *Telling Tales: Fear and Fantasy in Contemporary Design*. By "design art" they mean products that transcend the boundaries between function and art. Or, as I found myself scribbling in my notebook, "sculpture you can use". Designers featured here are as keen to probe the dark side of fairytales as well the light: while most people

will think of designer objects as things to covet – even love – plenty of the pieces in this show will give you nightmares instead of happy endings.

The first thing you see on entering is an oak-and-cedar bath by Netherlander designer Wieki Somers. This room of the show is entitled The Forest Glade. It's a clever concept. Just as you heighten your senses entering a real forest, so the subtle sounds of creaking wood and rustling leaves cause the London-weary visitor to become freshly alert – equally alive to the natural possibilities of beauty and danger. You peer just that bit closer at Julia Lohmann's Else, a bench in the shape of a decapitated cow covered in blood-burgundy leather.

Elsewhere in the forest glade – it's clearly a Dutch forest, most of the designers showcased here being from that part of the world – you'll find Jurgen Bey's quaint-but-vulnerable-looking Linen Cupboard House (a storage unit on wheels reinvented as a gypsy caravan) and Tord Boontje's Fig Leaf Wardrobe with its lush, coppery doors wrapped around a bronze clothes rack. In design as well as fairytales, however, things are not always what they seem. What appears at first glance to be the walnut surface of Maarten Baas's wonky Sculpt wardrobe is actually veneered steel.

Then it's out of the woods and into the Enchanted Castle section, where symbols of wealth and status are prodded and parodied. The Robber Baron collection by Belgian design duo Studio Job includes a black cast bronze and gilded jewel safe topped with the head of a clown. Next to it is a table fancifully crafted in the shape of golden smoke (the top) rising from four factory chimneys (the legs). Sebastian Brajkovic plays with an aristocratic theme by covering antique chairs with fussily turned legs in minimalist, office-style upholstery. This is not the fairytale castle you want to end up in, but the one you'd do anything to escape from.

And finally to the dark and doomy rooms of the Heaven and Hell section. There's significant emphasis on the latter. Here visitors peer awkwardly through windows to make out the sinister forms of objects apparently designed to remind us of our own mortality. They say you can't take it with you when you go; in the case of most items here, that would be a blessed relief. There's a red, urethane-rubber rug by Frédrikson Stallard, intended to represent the exact amount of blood in two people, while Canadian Kelly McCallum's stuffed fox (Do You Hear What I Hear) has gold-plated maggots squirming from its dead, dry ears. And for those who like to hold their fears close, there are "huggable cushions" in the shape of mushroom clouds by British designer Anthony Dunne and Cypriot Michael Anastassiades.

Finally, there's Dutch Joep van Lieshout's Sensory Deprivation Skull, which is made of

white fibreglass – a sinister take on Eero Aarnio's futuristic pod chair. That you could sit cosily inside; this is a skull lined with sheepskin. It demands that you do what the rest of this provocative exhibition only requires you to attempt metaphorically: get inside your own head.

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