

Nina Katchadourian

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A moving  
portrait –  
made in an  
aircraft toilet

In the latest in his series on striking photographs, our columnist looks at the ever-changing role of the humble lavatory in the evolution of society

YOU might not think that a cramped aeroplane lavatory is particularly inspirational but Nina Katchadourian has found a way to tap its hidden resources.

For a 2011 residency at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery in New Zealand, Katchadourian set herself the challenge of making the bulk of the work for her final exhibition on the 14-hour flight from her native San Francisco to Auckland.

"While in the lavatory on a domestic flight in March 2010, I spontaneously put a tissue paper toilet cover seat cover over my head and took a picture in the mirror using my cell phone," she explained.

"The image evoked 15th-century Flemish portraiture ... I made several forays to the bathroom [on the flight to Auckland] from my aisle seat, and by the time we landed I had a large group of new photographs entitled Lavatory Self-Portraits in the Flemish Style.

"I was wearing a thin black scarf that I sometimes hung up on the wall behind me to create the deep black ground that is typical of these portraits. There is no special illumination in use other than the lavatory's own lights and all the images are shot hand-held with the camera phone.

"At the Dunedin Public Art gallery, the photos were hung in historical frames on a deep red wall reminiscent of the painting galleries in museums like the Metropolitan Museum of Art."

On the other end of the scale to the tiny aeroplane lavatory is the gigantic public bathroom in Chongqing, China, the largest in the world, in fact.

More than 1,000 toilets are spread out over four floors and 32,290 square feet, inside a building with a faux Ancient Egyptian facade; the town officials' aim is to promote tourism, and spread "toilet culture".

Here, there is a toilet for everyone; from the classic stalls in minimal marble to outdoor lavatories with a view. There are several artistically-shaped urinals – brightly coloured, open-mouthed crocodiles, a crimson sink moulded as a woman bending forward wearing stilettoes, and a

Charles  
Saatchi



The Naked Eye

unique use of the Virgin Mary.

The modern toilet is widely attributed to Alexander Cummings, a London watchmaker, who was granted the first patent for a toilet in 1775. Cummings had improved upon the earlier designs of John Harrington, a writer and godson of Elizabeth I, who installed a primitive contraption in her palace in the late 1590s. Elizabeth was initially appalled at the idea of everyone in court knowing when the royal bowels had been emptied by the tell-tale sudden sound of gushing water.

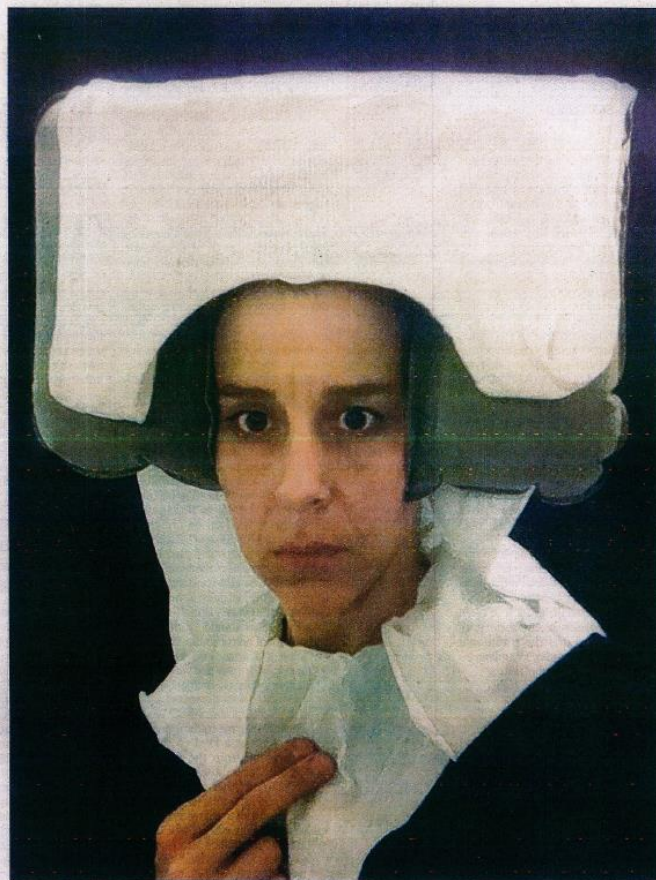
Harrington's toilet didn't catch on; Londoners appeared content with open sewers and hadn't yet realised that diseases were being festered.

Many pretty Victorian toilets are embellished with the delightful "Thomas Crapper & Co" branding, the company that had further developed the toilet, and opened the world's first lavatory showroom on King's Road.

Crapper's flushing toilet was patented in 1819, with a design that has changed very little today.

His invention succeeded dramatically as the relationship between hygiene and disease had finally dawned on us; Queen Victoria, mourning the loss of Prince Albert to typhoid, and almost losing her son Prince Edward to the same disease, passed a Public Health Act in 1848 stating that all new houses should be built with a toilet facility.

Since 1848, all of England has been flushing, and much of the rest of the developed world too. Today the gallons of water used causes people to worry about the wastefulness of our toilets. Eco-enthusiasts have attempted to invent new sanitation systems in households but nobody has gone further down the path to ingenious eco-friendliness than the traditional "pig toilets" found in rural Goa and China.



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Dating back to the Chinese Han dynasty (206 BC to 220 AD), pig toilets pair pigsties with privies. An outhouse is mounted over a pigsty, and as you surmised the pigs wait below a chute from the lavatory in eager anticipation.

In poorer homes, the set-up is more of a curtained, elevated platform with a hole to the ground, and as the pigs can sometimes become over-excited and aggressive you need a stick to bat their prying snouts away from your behind.

If you enjoy a Sunday roast pork, you will be relieved that pig toilets have all but vanished in China and are rapidly dying out in Goa; most households now build septic tanks to deal with their waste.

Of course for thousands of years until the mid-20th century, in China, Korea and Japan, human waste by-products were in high demand, and considered valuable.

The East managed to feed large populations by fertilising crops with "humanure" without polluting their water supplies, and even designed special canal networks to transport it by boat. Remember, please, that was

during the time medieval London was throwing dung into the streets.

When American soil scientist FH King visited China in 1911 to document their sanitation systems, his findings were remarkable. A booming business in dung collectors, traders and transporters was apparent, collecting the "waste" from every person's home in airtight terracotta jars.

The population of China at the time was similar to that of Europe, some 400 million inhabitants; every year more than 182 million tonnes of humanure was collected, equating to 1,160,000 tonnes of nitrogen, 376,000 tonnes of potassium and 150,000 tonnes of phosphate, all of which was returned to the soil.

The 4,000-year tradition was brought to a close with the arrival of even more effective artificial fertilisers, originally imported from the West during the first half of the 20th century.

So today, all of our waste goes to waste.

Charles Saatchi's latest book is *The Naked Eye*, published by Booth-Clibborn Editions.

Jet-set art: one of the images of historical Flemish women that Nina Katchadourian created while in a lavatory on a flight from the US to New Zealand

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