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TAKING A SHINE TO
BELGIAN DESIGN



belgique, c'est chic

The simple-sensual aesthetic spearheaded by design superstars Vervootd and Van Duyse is now being championed by a new generation of Belgians. Welcome to the world of low-key luxe, says **Katrina Burroughs**

Main picture: interior of a house in Cap d'Antibes designed by Belgian architect Nicolas Schuybroek. Insets from left: the world-feted Belgian designer Axel Vervootd. Antwerp-based architect/designer Vincent Van Duyse. The BRUT collective of six young Belgian designers







Axel Vervoordt – the designer, antiques dealer, collector and gallerist – is often cited by design insiders as laying the foundations for the quiet aesthetic that has become synonymous with Belgium's design archetype. For most, his appearance at the Biennale des Antiquaires in the Grand Palais Paris in 1982 proved a pivotal moment. "His taste was relatively unknown outside Belgium, but he had an epiphany in preparation for the Biennale," says Wim Pauwels, the design specialist whose publishing house Beta Plus has produced some 25 monographs of Belgian architects, designers and landscape architects. "He wanted to do away with construction and decoration and create a raw, industrial space with high ceilings, a bare concrete floor, great furniture and art. This revolutionary way of exhibiting at such a traditional fair seemed very risky, but his first visitors – Valentino, Hubert de Givenchy, Rudolf Nureyev, Yves Saint Laurent, Ralph Lauren – were very enthusiastic and became loyal clients and friends."

Vervoordt (pictured on previous pages) continues to be the designer of choice for many famous clients. The interiors branch of his business was behind Robert De Niro's New York penthouse, Sting and Trudie Styler's London apartment and Kanye West and Kim Kardashian's California home. And his trademark look of pared-back luxury, delight in texture and aversion to ornament has been embraced, in various ways, by subsequent Belgian creatives.

Vincent Van Duysen (pictured on previous pages), the architect whose international profile is such that he must rank only slightly below Magritte and Hergé in the league table of famous Belgians, has been defining his own form of rich refinement (example pictured above) since establishing his practice in 1990. "I love to work with layers and contrast to achieve a sort of warm sensuality. In that sense, I'm not into minimalism – I prefer sober interiors with soul," he says. Van Duysen's genius was discovered by Ilse Crawford, then editor of *Elle Decoration*. "I'd returned to Belgium having worked for a time in Milan and was living in a loft. Ilse saw a single picture in a French magazine and said she wanted to do a cover story on 'the sensual home,'" he recalls.

Almost 30 years on, his oeuvre is considerable, and he is the subject of a second monograph, *Vincent Van Duysen: Works 2009–2018* (£48, Thames & Hudson). His style is a balance of cosmopolitan and homegrown influences. "I think my studies during the emergence of



From top: an Antwerp house redesigned by Vincent Van Duysen illustrating his "sober interiors with soul" philosophy. Inside Axel Vervoordt's home, near Antwerp, with sofa and chairs designed by him. Jov linen Perspective Stripes rug, £420 per sq m

postmodernism and my time with Aldo Cibic at Sottsass Associati in Milan gave me an appreciation for essential and pure forms, but the application of materials such as linen, natural stone and oak is influenced strongly by my heritage," he says. He spreads the word about Belgian brilliance through his work with various European interiors brands. As creative director for Molteni&C | Dada, he has created a number of noted works including the VVD kitchen (from £40,000), and in January 2019, as art director of Sahco, he will be launching a dozen new collections of fabrics.

Van Duysen has also been instrumental in nurturing a number of important talents – with colleagues from his practice, such as Daphné Dascal and Stéphanie Laperre, going on to found distinctive studios. The duo set up Dascal Laperre in 2008, designing minimal but deeply





Clockwise from left: Xavier Lust bronze and glass S table, edition of eight, \$150,000; aluminium Meuble d'Appui cabinet, edition of eight, \$160,000; aluminium Cone (left of table) and T chairs, \$5,000 and \$3,200. Atelier Lachaert Dhanis bronze Crossed Leg sculpture, £33,600 at Gallery Fumi. Sébastien Caporaso brass and marble Breccia Viola table, €2,045. DIM Atelier and Dieter Vander Velpen brass The Sharks installation, from €12,000

"Clearly something's happening in Belgium. There's an incredible concentration of creative minds in this country, and I think we are all forced to raise the bar to a certain level to become noticeable and emerge from the international design pack."

One of the ways Belgians distinguish themselves is in their ability to elevate everyday design. Michaël Verheyden is the Flemish master of "uncommon objects for common rituals".

The designer, a former model for Raf Simons, created his own line of fashion accessories before graduating to lighting and furniture and describes his design DNA as deeply rooted in Flemish culture. "I feel very connected to the work of Axel Vervoordt and Vincent Van Duysen because they are capable of realising the most humble version of luxury there is," he says. "I try to create more awareness about our daily rituals. In a time where everything goes faster and harder, we need to create homes where it is possible to unwind and feel grounded – to slow down and make time for ourselves and our loved ones. We try to be generous with materials but keep the design as simple as possible. So much can be done with texture, proportion, weight and scale that complicated shapes seem superficial." As such, Verheyden creates simple but sensual objects, from his Lucid alabaster and brass table light (from £2,160 at CTO Lighting) to his new collection of stoneware plates and bowls thrown by Antwerp ceramists (from €143 at Graanmarkt 13).

Tactile materials are a key feature of Belgian design. There is linen, as used in the latest hand-tufted Geometria rugs by JoV – a new range of coloured stripes created by Ben Beirens, a print and textile designer for fashion brands such as Salvatore Ferragamo and Diesel Black. The highlight is Perspectives Stripes (£420 per sq m, pictured on previous page), a vivid statement design. Arte makes its Papyrus wallcovering from hand-folded paper, marked with metallic ink and cut into small strips, which is then woven on a hand loom (Cantala Papyrus, £129 per metre). Clay is the traditional material chosen by Atelier Vierkant for its highly textured overscale handmade vessels (examples pictured overleaf, from £295), which includes the new Kaseholm collection finished in a palette of sage, pastel pink and light green as well as a traditional terracotta hue.

Both Geometria and Kaseholm were unveiled at the Biennale Interieur in Kortrijk last October – a gathering CEO Jo Libeer calls the design equivalent of slow food.



comfortable spaces dressed with tactile furnishings. A kind of timeless, trend-proof design is what sets Belgian creatives apart – and is winning over a global following. Architect Nicolas Schuybroek, who specialises in serene high-end international residences from Paris and Cap d'Antibes (pictured on opening pages) to Mexico City and the smartest Belgian homes, describes his own style as a mix of the monastic, warm and minimalistic. "I'm not interested in creating a 'show-off' type of architecture but rather in embracing the essence of materials and objects," he says. Since establishing his practice in 2011, he has observed remarkable developments on the design scene.

"We don't want to be the megaphone on what exists but the telescope of what is coming," he says. So what does he see through his long lens? "In the old days, designers worked for brands, but now very good Belgian designers are putting their designs into production directly," he says. "And some design is going the way of art as creatives make one-offs and sell them on the gallery circuit – that's something that is quite new in the past five years." He points to the BRUT Collective (pictured on opening pages), a group of six Belgian design studios including Ben Storms, Charlotte Jonckheer and Linde Freya Tangelder of Destroyers/Builders, as typical of this exciting emergence of independent-spirited creatives.

BRUT, which debuted at Milan Design Week in 2018, is among the newest of the new. The collective came out of a meeting at Collectible, the Brussels fair devoted to 21st-century design co-founded by Clélie Debehault and Liv Vaisberg. "Each designer came to showcase their work at the fair's inaugural show in 2018 and ended up together, forming one of today's most promising design groups," says Debehault, who was formerly a director at Galerie Vedovi in Brussels. Her mission is to introduce art collectors to the best in emerging and established design: "Belgian design has always been strong – it's a small and relatively young country but has given birth to Belgian surrealism and art nouveau," she says. "It is very well known for risk-taking and avant-garde art collectors, and we aim to convert them to buy contemporary design – and recognise its potential for investment."

So what should these collectors covet? The sculptural lighting of Vladimir Slavov of DIM Atelier is one to watch. Rising star Slavov, spotted at Collectible 2018, was commissioned to create lighting for the Michelin-starred The Jane restaurant in Antwerp and responded with a spectacular installation of 14 cast-brass forms called

The Sharks (from €12,000, pictured on previous page), created in collaboration with Dieter Vander Velzen. The limited edition art furniture of Xavier Lust

(examples pictured on previous pages) – the established designer/sculptor known for his curved, dynamic forms for Driade and MDF Italia and his art furniture sold by Ralph Pucci, Nilufar and Galerie du Passage – is certainly on the radar: his S table (\$150,000, edition of eight, pictured on previous page) is sculpture-cast in bronze and topped with bronze-edged glass.

Interior architect Sébastien Caporusso is another name to know. His sleek, simple chairs, lamps and tables in flowing forms and "noble materials" include the Breccia Viola table (\$2,045, pictured on previous page) crafted in marble and sanded brass. And the studio to track is the aforementioned Destroyers/Builders, founded in 2015 by Linde Freya Tangelder. Its innovative work runs from substantial chunks of design art to reimagined basic household objects. Bolder chairs, for instance, evoke fluted architectural columns (\$7,680, edition of eight). Sharing a similar monumental aesthetic but scaled to fit on a bookshelf, its Brick bookend (\$154.80) was recently launched as part of the collection at Antwerp-based design platform Valerie Objects. There is no better place to start a Belgian design habit than its website – a virtual shop window for the cool kids of Belgian design established by Axel Van Den Bossche, CEO of Serax, and Veerle Wenes, owner of Antwerp's Valerie Traan Gallery (whose high-end online platform Valerie Traan is also a go-to site), with a mission to "return aesthetic meaning to the tools and objects that we use every day". Stars of the collection are the artists Fien Muller and Hannes Van Severen, whose work includes the hammock-like Duo seat (\$3,350, pictured above right).

While Muller Van Severen's style is quirky and lighthearted, there are some Belgian creatives whose oeuvre crosses from playful eccentricity into the surreal. Atelier Lachaert Dhanis, the partnership between Sofie Lachaert and Luc d' Hanis, produces

functional sculptures such as *Crossed Leg* (\$33,600 at Gallery Fumi, edition of seven, pictured on previous page) and *Trio Bronze* (\$48,000 at Gallery Fumi, edition of seven), entangled chairs in patinated cast bronze. "The viewer is drawn to the chairs by their unexpected melting together. It is an invitation to take a closer look, a plea for dropping preconceptions about the banality of the archetype. Nothing is ever what it seems at the first glance," says Lachaert of the subversion of familiar forms. The everyday furnishings seem huddled in conversation, perhaps debating the special nature of Belgian design. How can it be both easy to live with and aesthetically arresting, perfectly contemporary and absolutely timeless, they are asking one another. Perhaps Magritte would know? After all, as he never, ever said, *Ceci n'est pas un trend*. ♦



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BRILLIANT BELGIANS

Arte, arte-international.com. **Atelier Lachaert Dhanis**, see Gallery Fumi. **Atelier Vierkant**, atelievierkant.com. **Axel Vervoordt**, axel-vervoordt.com. **Beta Plus**, beta pluscom. **BRUT Collective**, brut-collective.be. **CTO Lighting**, ctolighting.co.uk. **Destroyers/Builders**, destroyersbuilders.com. **DIM Atelier**, dimatelier.com. **Gallery Fumi**, galleryfumi.com. **Graanmarkt 13**, graanmarktl3.com. **Jov Design**, jov-design.com. **Michaël Verheyden**, michael verheyden.com. **Molteni&C Dada**, moltenigrup.com. **Muller Van Severen**, see Valerie Objects. **Nicolas Schuybroek**, architecture, see ns-architects.com; interior design, see When Objects Work. **Sébastien Caporusso**, caporusso.com. **Studio Daskal Laperre**, daskal-laperre.com. **Valerie Objects**, valerie-objects.com. **Valerie Traan**, valerietraan.be. **Vincent Van Duysen**, vincentvanduysen.com. **When Objects Work**, whenobjectswork.com. **Xavier Lust**, xavierlust.com.