



“To the outside observer, Belgium has a precise identity: It’s the country that’s given the world waffles, chocolate, beer, and Tintin.”

*Max Borka*

## The fragmented country's design culture is all over the map. That's not such a bad thing.

By Max Borke  
Photo portfolio by Teun Voeten

SHORTLY BEFORE HIS DEATH LAST YEAR at the age of 48, the Belgian designer Maarten Van Severen paid a visit to the Italian manufacturer Alberto Alessi to discuss a line of cutlery he wanted to create. Van Severen had collected hundreds of pieces of silverware in his research—not the shiny, expensive kind peddled by designers like Alessi, but cheap, old, rusty pieces of iron and plastic, the kind that can be found in Belgium's flea markets. The set Van Severen proposed represented a totally new direction for the designer, who was known for his strict reductivism: It consisted of three elements that differed wildly in materials and character, the spoon clearly Oriental by inspiration, the fork referring to classic European tradition, and the knife, made out of ceramic, at once primitive and highly technological.

Van Severen is commonly hailed as the greatest Belgian designer of the last few decades. But more than that, his cutlery seems a marvelous symbol both for Belgian design, an industry that has itself begun to take a turn toward the uncommon, and for Belgium, a country with its own diverse influences that was artificially created in 1830 by quarrelling neighbors with little in common—the French-speaking Walloons in the South and the Dutch-speaking Flemish in the North. In the middle was Brussels, an orphaned city that even now is mostly neglected by both regions. (Wallonia, Flanders, and the Brussels-Capital district are each run by several levels of government that have difficulty reaching consensus; Brussels, divided into 20-plus communes, and ruled by a number of international, national, regional, and local authorities, has become almost impossible to govern.)

This geographical division has been the cause of more problems than seems befitting a country that's barely the size of Massachusetts. The most acute crisis would appear to be a lack of national identity, which, among other things, has proved a stumbling block for designers: Unlike their prolific neighbors the Dutch, Belgian designers have no means by which to present a united front, leaving the rest of the world confused as to what Belgian design means or who even belongs to the club. (continued on page 51)



Belgium  
from  
the Inside



previous spread A message scrawled on the door of La Gallerie Sous Les Rails in Brussels—"Back in five minutes, went to get beer"—is actually part of an installation on the theme of sleeplessness by the Belgian artists Thibault Jonckheere and Christophe Lambert.

above A voluminous Yohji Yamamoto dress stood like a sculpture in the foyer of Antwerp's MoMu fashion museum this summer, just one of 80 pieces that were part of the designer's "Dream Shop" exhibit.



left A mannequin reclines in the entryway of the chic Antwerp outpost of Episode, a tiny chain of vintage shops that stud Europe's style capitals.

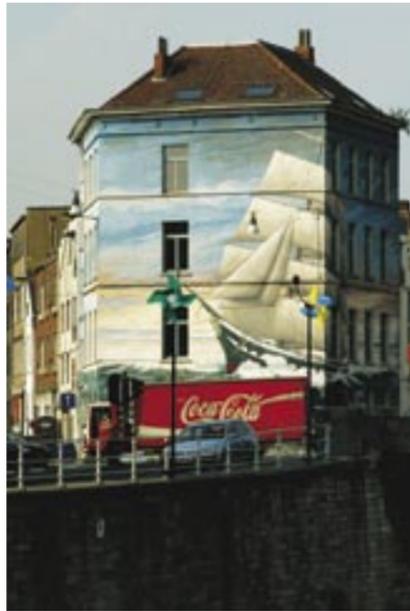


This summer, the Belgian arts nonprofit Recyclart and its graphic designer, Elzo Durt, invited artists to graffiti the halls of Chapelle-Kapellekerk in Brussels, a converted train station that is now home to an arts complex, a café, and an open-air gallery.





above For the biannual Flowercarpet, thousands of begonias are laid like a tapestry in the square outside of Brussels's Grand-Place. This year's ambitious design spun like a kaleidoscope on nine rotating stages.



above This mural in the Molenbeek district, overlooking Brussels's canal and painted by the artist Claire Daliers, was commissioned in 2003 by the owners of Le Chien Vert, the fabric store that occupies the house's ground level.



above A bay window in the shape of a hull earned this house the nickname "The Little Boat." Part of The Five Continents, a complex of Art Nouveau townhouses behind Antwerp's Royal Museum of Arts, the house was commissioned by a shipbuilder in 1901.



left Cheeky logo for Ijsboerke, a popular brand of Belgian ice cream.



below Renovations to the Atomium, which re-opened to the public in February, include revamped exhibition spaces as well as a dormitory with suspended plastic-sphere beds for visiting schoolchildren.



left Wrought iron grille-work decorates an Art Nouveau building on Brussels's Boulevard Leopold II.



left For Tintin creator Hergé's 100th anniversary next year, Brussels has planned an exhibition at its Museum of Fine Arts, a set of commemorative stamps, and a Tintin-themed flea market. But the cartoon reporter's likeness can always be found on murals like this one throughout the city.



above Renovation often trumps reconstruction in Belgium, resulting in these sorts of disjointed facades.



left A cityscape in downtown Ghent.



Three tunnels run underneath Antwerp's River Schelde. These recently renovated 1930s escalators transport pedestrians from the passageway to the street.

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To the common observer, of course, Belgium has a very precise identity: It's the country that's given the world waffles, chocolate, beer, and Tintin. That sentiment is encouraged at home as well as by the government, which has traditionally devoted most of its resources to those exports rather than spending time, money, and bureaucratic energy on making Belgium a hub for visual culture. And in fact, Belgium's reputation as the source of all things hedonistic has always overshadowed the country's contributions to design, which began in the late 19th century when Belgium became one of the main purveyors of Art Nouveau, and continued through the 1950s with the construction of the Atomium, the famously oversize steel molecule observatory that was created for the 1958 Brussels World's Fair. (The way this monument was allowed to deteriorate—until it was just recently renovated with help from firms like Vitra and the Antwerp-based Conix Architecten—raises further questions about the Belgian government's commitment to supporting a local design industry.)

This indifference has, for decades, taken a creative toll on the industry. Belgium's citizens, who famously fill their homes with art and design objects in the most grandiose sense, were buying primarily from the Italians and Germans, who ruled the country's interiors market with an iron fist. Home-grown designers served mainly as contractors for architects, their potential and expertise stifled by a need for pure function. Until a few years ago, even the most avant-garde producers and designers—with the notable exception of Van Severen—limited themselves to a very prudent kind of minimalism that seemed to have as its most important mission to blend seamlessly with the surrounding modernist architecture.

But a curious thing has happened lately. Despite a lack of funding and a national inability to self-promote, a new community of designers has not only formed but has also begun to attract international attention. Perhaps it is the legacy of Van Severen; maybe it's a response to what's happening in the Netherlands, where the Dutch get attention even for designs that are only prototypes or puns. Belgians, traditionally wary of such frivolity and interested only in putting objects into production, have now branched out into something bolder and more playful that is nonetheless commercially viable. The young production company Vlaemsch calls in foreign designers, such as Leon Ransmeier, to create a collection of light and colorful surrealist objects. Extremis, a company started by the Belgian designer Dirk Wynants, specializes in a breezy sort of outdoor furniture that highlights new methods and clever forms. Add to this the subtle talent of Danny Venlet, the dash of Arne Quinze, and the work of the innumerable young designers who have suddenly manifested themselves over the past few years, and one can only conclude that Belgian design has begun to go with the international flow. ✦

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