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Symbolic style

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SYMBOLIC



STYLE

The tide of fashion ebbs and flows but designers from Belgium have a knack of creating work that is both timeless and innovative, as revealed in *Dress Code*, a compelling new exhibition of Belgian fashion curated by Charles Kaisin and the Hong Kong Design Institute. HELEN LIU reports.



When talking about trends, it's usually the fashion "capitals" of Paris, Milan, London and New York that attract the most attention as their new collections elbow "old" work aside with such dizzying speed that the traditional concept of a "season" has ceased to have any meaning. But the designers from one Northern European country are increasingly ready to challenge this traditional concept with "fashion that never goes out of fashion" or as Charles Kaisin, curator of the exhibition *Dress Code* (at HKDI until March 2014) puts it, "Belgian fashion is never about trends, but always about the search for highly individual and often avant-garde and unique creations."

Dress Code is part of the Belgian Spirit project, an initiative of the three Belgian regions, Brussels, Flanders and Wallonia, to promote Belgium's creative industries in Asia. The originality of Belgian fashion has its roots in Antwerp, which has been a fashion centre for over 500 years since the late 1500s, when it produced the chemicals used to dye the black cloth that was essential to the style statements of the Hapsburgs and their Imperial Spanish court.

However, it was the 1980s, when the renowned "Antwerp Six" - Dirk Bikkembergs, Ann Demeulemeester, Walter Van Beirendonck, Dries Van Noten, Dirk Van Saene, and Marina Yee - graduated from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp and hit the international fashion scene that the city's importance to the contemporary fashion world became dramatically apparent.

Among the Six we find the sport and leisure aesthetics of Dirk Bikkembergs, the fragile toughness of Ann Demeulemeester, the colourful exuberance of Walter Van Beirendonck, the poetic aesthetics of Dries Van Noten, the hand-painted features of Dirk Van Saene, and the recycling beauty of Marina Yee. Their unusual designs, combined with exquisite fabrics cut with sculptural precision and a touch of whimsy have helped to build a reputation for Belgian fashion design that is hard to beat but the nation's reputation does not rest on the Six alone. Indeed the group's deconstructionism could be seen as an evolution from 1900s when the House of Norine emerged as a significant centre for couture.

Founded by Paul-Gustave Van Hecke and Honorine (Norine) Deschrijver, the house rose to rival fashion

OPPOSITE PAGE TOP LEFT A LOOK FROM THE AUTUMN/WINTER 2014 COLLECTION BY TOM VAN DER BORGH
OPPOSITE MAIN A LOOK FROM THE SPRING/SUMMER 2014 COLLECTION "READY-TO-WEAR" BY A.F.VANDEVORST
THIS PAGE A LOOK FROM THE SPRING 2014 RAF SIMONS COLLECTION BY RAF SIMONS





houses of Paris, although Norine's pieces were much more advanced, incorporating artists' works from the Modernist, Surrealist and Expressionist styles.

Charles Kaisin's *Dress Code* exhibition, shown alongside *Design in Motion*, a retrospective of his recent work, provides a scan of contemporary Belgian fashion.

The exhibition's title refers to the way we wear clothes for specific situations such as cocktail parties or at work. Four types of dress code are introduced in the exhibition (casual, schools, black tie, and uniform) with pieces from over 50 Belgian designers including the sharp tailoring of Raf Simons (now creative director at Dior), the flowing draperies of Jean-Paul Knott, the surreal creations of Jean-Paul Lespagnard, the arty passion of AF Vandevorst, the conceptual witticisms of Martin Margiela, the beautiful knits of Christian Wijnants, and the ephemeral girl-like silhouettes of Veronique Branquinho.

Whilst marked by their respective unique characteristics, inspirations, materials and techniques all these designers share a special know-how, a common craftsmanship and a pursuit of excellence. Kaisin says they are bound together by a strong signature that consists of "research, timelessness, innovation, individuality and great quality".

Research is a key element in achieving the best quality. As with any experiment, Belgian designers have a laboratory for their research. The most satisfactory designs can be obtained by theoretical studies and practical experiments. Bruno Pieters' new avant-garde brand "Honest by" is a perfect example. It was launched in order to create an organic and transparent brand after one year's research vetting the suppliers.

Belgian design is so coherent and ahead of its time that dresses created two decades ago can still be considered fashionable and thus it's not surprising that bags from Brussels based Delvaux, the oldest luxury leather house in Europe, are possessed by almost every elegant Belgian woman, with many inherited from mothers or grandmothers.

This doesn't mean that Belgian fashion is static. Emerging young designers have instilled the Belgian fashion world with countless innovations. Fresh elements, including not only the colour of the dresses but also what's behind them (a vision of life and what goes with it) have been introduced to make the country's fashion

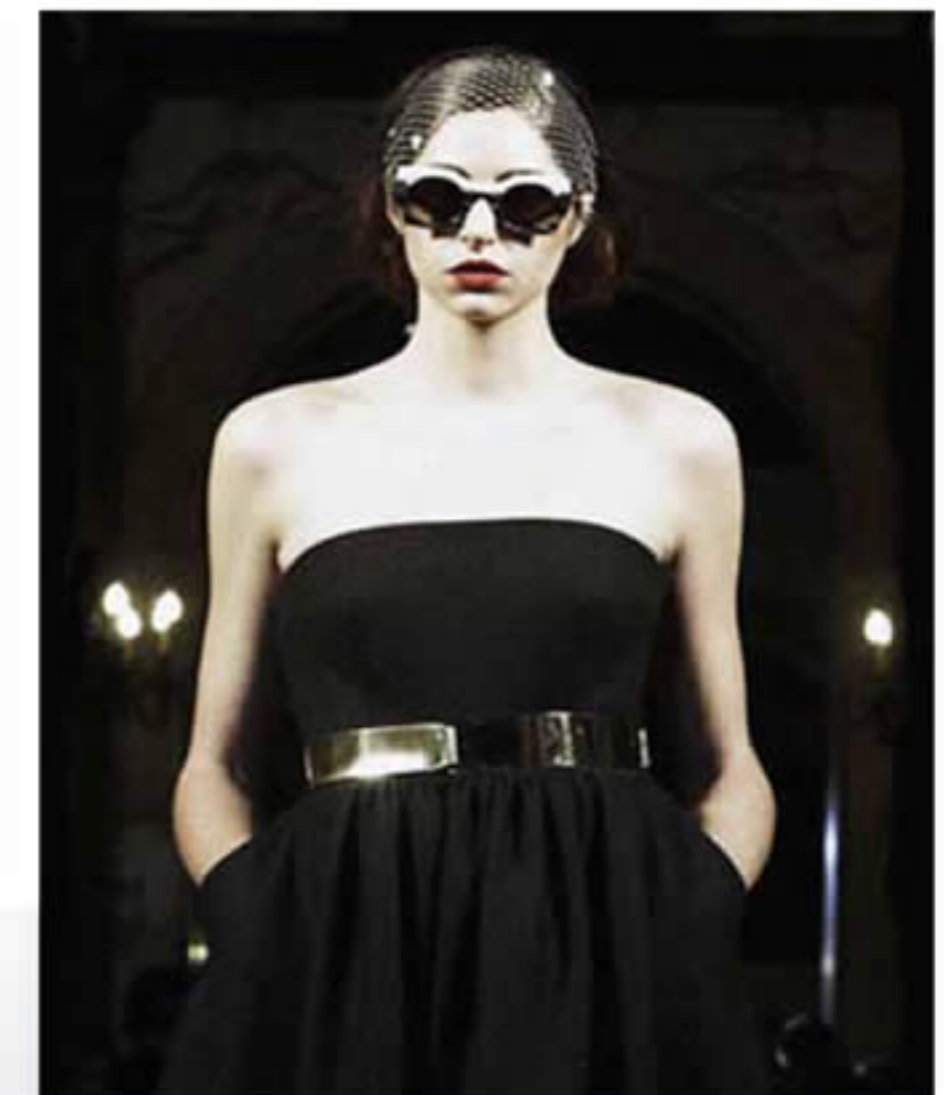
TOP LEFT A LOOK FROM THE FALL 2013 COLLECTION BY HAIDER ACKERMANN
 LEFT A LOOK FROM THE FALL 2013 COLLECTION "UHURU SASA" BY JAN JAN VAN ESSCHE
 OPPOSITE PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: A LOOK FROM THE SPRING/SUMMER 2014 COLLECTION BY VERONIQUE BRANQUINHO; A LOOK FROM ANNEMIE VERBEKE'S COLLECTION; A LOOK FROM 2014 SPRING/SUMMER COLLECTION "READY-TO-WEAR" BY CHRISTIAN WIJNANTS

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« IN BELGIUM WE ARE GIFTED WITH VERY TALENTED FASHION DESIGNERS WHO ARE IN MANY CASES TRUE ARTISTS »



more innovative, making change and invention the lifeblood of Belgian designers. As Bruno Pieters puts it "I was inspired by this huge billboard of Gandhi I saw in Delhi, saying 'Be the change you want to see in the world'. I realised I should adopt this attitude."

Bearing the hallmarks of highly individualised designers, Belgian apparel is unique and often in limited editions but it rarely loses sight of the fact that form, however avant-garde, must still have function. "For me, Belgian style is a kind of realism," Hirofumi Kurino of Tokyo's United Arrows retail group said in an interview with *The New York Times*. "There are many strong ideas, but most of the clothes on the runway are wearable – and that is a strong part of the vision. The way they are teaching and guiding is excellent, respecting freedom and individuality, but with each student really thinking about the market."

With realism comes responsibility and Kaisin is quick to point out that environmental consciousness has long been an aspect of Belgian design. "Long before vintage and customising was fashionable, one of the Antwerp Six, Marina Yee, was already recycling old fabrics and clothes into amazing unique creations," he says. "Today, we see the very successful project of Les Petits Riens [the little nothings], an organisation that sells old clothes. Every year they organise the 'Second Hand Second Life' fashion show with the help of the Belgian designers to create new creations with old clothes from their stock."

But to insist on sustainability is to turn back the cultural tide that disposable fashion represents, especially in today's popular "fast fashion". It is a challenging task that requires awareness and co-operation from both designers and the consumers. "In fashion, as in any form of consumption it is clear," says



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE A LOOK FROM THE 2013 COLLECTION "A PINK O'CLOCK SHADOW" BY LUCAS STRAETMANS; A LOOK FROM TIM VAN STEENBERGEN'S COLLECTION; A LOOK FROM MAISON MARTIN MARGELA'S COLLECTION; A LOOK FROM THE SPRING/SUMMER 2014 COLLECTION BY KRIST

Kaisin. "Designers and customers have to think about the way we live our lives, about ecology and the future of a healthy world and mind."

Some of Belgium's new generation of designers are also included in the HKDI show. Whilst inheriting the coherency of Belgian fashion these new voices speak from fresh points of view. They incorporate elements of other creative endeavours such as painting, photography and architecture, and this crossover trend is more prevalent in Belgium than any design centre. With so much new talent in the pipeline Kaisin is confident that Belgium will continue to be a source of fashion creativity for the whole world. "In Belgium we are gifted with very talented fashion designers who are in many cases true artists," he says, pointing to five aspects of the country's design community that many find surprising: "a great number of very talented designers in a very small country, the humour of many designs, the innovative way of rethinking clothes, the surprising accessories and the open-minded fantasies of the designers which they use as a laboratory for the future". With such qualities it's likely that Belgium will continue to captivate the fashion world for another 500 years. ☺

The exhibition Dress Code will be at HKDI until 31 March 2014