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The world of Vincent Van Duysen

The renowned architect on colour, his new collection for Molteni & C and why he's as much Italian as he is Belgian

Words AMY BRADFORD

Vincent Van Duysen has strong memories of the time his Antwerp apartment was featured in ELLE Decoration UK 20 years ago, early in his career. 'For me, it was the start of everything,' he says. To be told by one of the world's foremost architects and designers that we played a small part in his rise is quite something, but when we unearth the piece in our archive (October 1996, if you're interested; pictured above right), it proves that Van Duysen's calm, considered style showed star quality from the beginning – 'modernism with a soft "m";' we labelled it at the time.

Van Duysen – more effervescent in person than his quiet designs suggest – is now an

international star, known far beyond his native Belgium. When we meet, he is about to fly to Tokyo, where he is unveiling a store design and a new furniture collection for Molteni & C, the Italian furniture company that he has collaborated with since 2015, and of which he became creative director the following year. With his own company, he is working on residential projects around the world and is designing his first hotel in his home town of Antwerp. His illustrious fan base includes Hollywood actress Julianne Moore (who interviewed him in 2014 for American design website Remodelista) and fashion designer Alexander Wang, with whom Van Duysen

designed a London store to reflect Wang's passion for sporty grey-and-black simplicity.

To understand what makes Van Duysen a visionary, you have to see what makes him different. At first glance, his aesthetic seems typical of his native Belgium: earthy colours borrowed from nature in its more sombre aspect, organic materials and little to no ornamentation (Van Duysen professes a loathing of anything ostentatious, or, to use his word, 'screamy'). But in conversation, it becomes clear that he also sees himself as part of a Milanese tradition, one where architects have respect for interiors and place as much value on the design of a single



Clockwise from above BS Residence, Zwevegem, Belgium, a farmhouse conversion that Van Duysen designed. A collection of pots for When Objects Work (available from Haus in the UK). Van Duysen and his apartment featured in ELLE Decoration in 1996



water glass as they do on the structure of their buildings. Achille Castiglioni and Gio Ponti are among the names that he cites in this context. 'Northern Italians are not typical Italians,' he muses. 'They are passionate workers, driven and focused, like me. I inherited some Mediterranean flair from my mother, who has Spanish blood, but I also have very Calvinistic northern European traits.'

After graduating from college, Van Duysen lived and worked in Milan for several years, not unlike the Flemish painters of the Renaissance – whose colour sense he so admires. 'I went to Italy because I wanted

Van Duysen sees himself as part of a Milanese design tradition, where architects place as much value on a single glass as they do on the structure of their buildings

to learn about the art of living,' he explains, stating that he seeks to combine 'the very architectural with the very accessible, the very human, the very touchable.' Italian brands like Molteni & C appreciate his 'understated elegance', and in turn he appreciates their timeless style and refusal to kowtow to trends.

There's certainly a holistic feel to Van Duysen's relationship with Molteni & C, for which he's created advertising campaigns as well as furniture collections and store designs; he is one of a growing number of starry creative directors that big brands are employing to energise their identities. ►



This page, from left Alexander Wang store, London. 'Quinten' cabinet for Molteni & C. 'Gaston' chair for Poliform. 'Oskar' table for B&B Italia
Opposite, clockwise from top Villa Necchi, Van Duysen's current inspiration. 'Infra-Structure' light for Flos. 'Paul' sofa for Molteni & C

VINCENT VANDUYSEN

Van Duysen's latest three pieces for Molteni & C allude to Flemish art: the 'Paul' sofa is named after painter Pieter Paul Rubens; the 'Jan' coffee table after Jan Van Eyck; and the 'Quinten' cabinet after Quinten Massys. Like many of Van Duysen's designs, in photographs they look irreproachably tasteful, but it's only close up that you appreciate how beautiful they are: the distinctive double seams and tapering legs of the 'Paul' sofa, for instance, ensure that it looks flawless from any angle; the mix of matt and glossy lacquers and metals on the 'Quinten' create a stealthy glamour.

Van Duysen's palette may be pared down, but he comes alive when talking about colour. He rhapsodises about the 'radish pink' and 'oxblood red' of new velvet editions of the 'Paul' sofa, and the celadon greens he saw at Milanese landmark Villa Necchi that currently inspire him. 'I love most greens, as well as smoky greys and browns: the colours of earth,' he says. 'But my favourite shade right now is a bone colour - I'm doing lots of research into it.' This is the hue that he's used in his own Antwerp home, alongside lots of black and white, wood and stone. His softening of this colour scheme with beaten-

up antique chairs, tribal fabrics and textured rugs renders the space welcoming rather than cold. 'For me, home is about feeling disconnected from the world; it's about serenity, contemplation and unwinding in a warm environment with a sense of comfort, where you feel protected and safe,' he says.

Encouragingly, Van Duysen's commitment to these ideals isn't just for clients with the deepest pockets: one of his current projects is a development of serviced flats for the elderly in Antwerp. That's one retirement home we'd look forward to moving into. vincentvanduyesen.com; molteni.it



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