

EYE

Vincent Van Duysen on Creating Timeless Zen

● A protagonist of the modern design world, Vincent Van Duysen opens up about his balancing aesthetic and designing Molteni & C's first outdoor collection.

BY SOFIA CELESTE

MILAN – Vincent Van Duysen's oeuvre could very well be illustrated in shades of beige and various earth tones that calm the mind and spirit. His eponymous architect studio, founded in 1989, is credited with forward-looking offices and residences that span the globe from Antwerp, Belgium, to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. In and around the design scene, the design veteran is spreading his zen with his meditative objects and interior design projects.

Though imbuing natural surroundings with structures and sculpture is nothing new, Van Duysen's most recent outing this year was Molteni & C's first outdoor collection, for which he reinterpreted works by the most important contemporary designers, including U.K. architectural firm Foster + Partners, Israeli designer Ron Gilad and the late pioneer of Italian contemporary design and architecture Gio Ponti. The Palinfrasca sofa and armchair was based on late Molteni art director Luca Meda's 1994 project, inspired by a basket weave, representing a safe and intimate place.

Elsewhere, Van Duysen wove this meditative spirit into the fashion world when he unfurled a collection of meditative pieces with New York City-based, men's performance line Jacques to create a tranquil yet dynamic environment "supporting the mind and body through movement and intention," his studio said, adding that the creative process involved a sustainable, long-lasting approach to minimalist design through functionality and their use of enduring materials.

This sustainable ethos extends to his Zara Home+ by Vincent Van Duysen line, which involved a deep-dive into Van Duysen's own archives, revisiting some of his most famous pieces and styles, rooted in instilling purity into new creations, thus rendering them accessible and economical for a mass public.

Here, WWD chats with Van Duysen about the creation of his aesthetic and cleaning out the clutter.

WWD: Time and time again you achieve serenity, calmness with your designs – whether it's a vase or an outdoor set. How do you clean out the clutter?

V.V.D.: To me simplicity is key, and it means undoing the clutter and getting to the core – achieving authenticity, austerity and purity. Overall I think that balance between purity and content is needed. The richness of a space or of an object is elevated undoubtedly by exquisite details that might read as a more maximal approach but at the same time, other projects or objects ask for reductionism. That's when I remove everything that is superfluous. To me the core is a design that is timeless, functional and human-centric.

WWD: How do you manage so many diverse projects and stay balanced?

V.V.D.: It's a mindset, I am like a sponge, super observative. It's also passion that drives me to be alert and be creative and awake....Also, the diversity of projects



A Modernist Escape by Vincent Van Duysen for Zara Home.

Vincent Van Duysen poses beside his reimagined Palinfrasca chair for Molteni & C, which was originally designed by Luca Meda.



Vincent Van Duysen and his team designed Casa M in Melides, Portugal. The structure blends in seamlessly, camouflaged by the rolling hills, dunes and cork trees of Alentejo.

nourishes my creativity.

In general, I try to balance this hectic life with a healthy lifestyle and transcendental meditation. Furthermore, the talent and dedication of my team supports me and inspires me. I also achieve being balanced by staying true to myself and to my vision without following trends. As I look for my own inner balance, the same is true with my work. The projects or products might be diverse but at the core I search for a purity and organicity that strives to improve the lives of humans. I want to achieve well-balanced work in order to also slow down today's existence, which is too fast, too saturated, too overstimulated. How do I reach it? With purity of form, natural materials, clean geometries, warm and tactile textures added to the formula, my intent to always create timeless pieces.

WWD: What do you look for in a brand when it comes to a new project?

V.V.D.: What's paramount to me is the chemistry between myself and a given client, and the reciprocal inspiration and

symbiotic exchange. In a new project or with a new client I feel like I need to share the same values and vision, I also want to work with clients or partners that challenge me, that bring me off the beaten path.

WWD: What are your favorite materials to work with, especially in this new outdoor collection with Molteni & C?

V.V.D.: It is not only about the outdoor collection, it's more in general. Organic, natural materials; with texture, that are tactile and that age well.

WWD: Why do you think legendary Molteni designer Luca Meda's legacy lives on so strongly and why did you pick the Palinfrasca sofa to re-envision within the Outdoor collection?

V.V.D.: Luca Meda's legacy lives on because it is unique. I see this heritage element as a tribute to Meda's work. In the case of Palinfrasca, the Moltenis have shown me an object that Meda created with the woven backrest for himself and that was the starting point for me and the Palinfrasca collection. Palinfrasca – with its weaving technique – reflects the fluidity and dynamism of nature, and very organic. This piece is like a tribute to nature.

WWD: What do you think about Italy's design and interiors market compared to others? What are its strengths and weaknesses?

V.V.D.: The secret recipe of the Italian design success is that it is steeped in excellence, architectural heritage, and

Vincent Van Duysen's meditative objects for Jacques.



outstanding craftsmanship. Italian brands usually do not scream "design." It's an understated sophistication and elegance. It's cultural and it goes beyond design itself. It's the Italians' past, culture, fashion and food that reflects on Molteni's identity, based on 90 years of history of building a brand with excellence and tradition.

WWD: What sort of real estate projects do you have coming up? What other projects are exciting you these days?

V.V.D.: All of my projects are actually really exciting. To name a few, I have ongoing hospitality projects in Comporta and Lisbon, Portugal for JNCQuoi (an upscale restaurant and an innovative concept where food meets fashion meets hospitality). I am also extremely busy with architectural and interior projects in Belgium and then in Thailand, Singapore, Berlin, the U.S. The first outdoor collection with Molteni & C, plus many more to come, just like what you saw at Salone 2023.

WWD: Another legendary Molteni designer, Gio Ponti, is one of the biggest names still in the design and architecture world, years after his death. Why do his designs resonate so much today more than ever?

V.V.D.: Gio Ponti's designs are imbued with excellence and architectural heritage. He was able to create exceptional environments with his multifaceted creativity; his style was unique and based on unexpected geometries and refined materials and use of light. Ponti is one-of-a-kind because as an architect he covered the entire creative spectrum with interiors and product design.

WWD: Can you tell us about your relationship with Molteni. How is it different working with a strong family-run company in comparison to your other contracts?

V.V.D.: The world of Molteni & C is unique: They draw from excellence, heritage and outstanding craftsmanship. Their style is not screaming "design," it's an understated sophistication and elegance, just like my creations. Ours is a symbiosis of worlds with an architectural and interior design attitude that tries to rethink and address both the world and the art of living. Molteni Group is still family-owned and I am very close to them and to Carlo Molteni – that is how deep the rapport goes.