

Vincent Van Duyssen The Protagonist





T

he first time Julianne Moore met Vincent Van Duysen, there was something of a role reversal in the interaction between the Hollywood actress and the Belgian designer and architect. Moore had been admiring Van Duysen from afar, name dropping him in interviews and tearing out pictures of his work from magazines for her moodboards. When they were finally introduced in 2008 by Francisco Costa, the former creative director of *Calvin Klein Collection's* womenswear, “*She went completely crazy. She said I can’t believe this is Vincent,*” says Van Duysen, recalling how he was introduced to her husband with great alacrity. “*This is my mentor, my favourite architect. Since then, we exchanged emails and we became super super close friends.*”

This exchange goes some way to introducing Van Duysen, an architect who, beloved by the A-List, is also something of a guru or celebrity in his own right. In a 35-year-long career, Van Duysen has made a name for himself as a maestro of minimalism, in demand for his luxuriously pared back, mainly residential spaces which allow their inhabitants to truly escape from the world outside. “*Most of my clients are hard-working, and it’s important when someone is coming in that you are immediately overwhelmed by a sense of comfort and well-being, that you’re captivated by a very serene and calm atmosphere that hangs through the house,*” says the designer. “*I use the word ‘sanctuary,’*

because you come in and you feel really disconnected.”

It’s Valentine’s Day and Van Duysen is speaking to me on the phone from New York, sounding anything but disconnected. January had been a turbulent month—first grieving his father’s death and then recovering from the flu—and our call was squeezed in before a week of retreat in the Dominican Republic where he will turn his phone off. “*They always know how to find me,*” he jokes. I had read several interviews describing the breakneck speed at which Van Duysen speaks, and wasn’t disappointed. He is breathlessly witty and warm with a Northern European accent whose overall effect reminds me a little of Karl Lagerfeld—albeit with less of a sting. In New York, he has just finished one residential project and is set to start two more, as well as another in The Hamptons. After our interview Van Duysen has a couple of hours free in which he will go to a few galleries. He will celebrate Valentine’s Day in the hotel with his partner; a respite of sorts. “*I don’t want to go to any lousy restaurant,*” he explains. “*I just want to be quiet.*”

Van Duysen was born in Lokeren, Belgium, a small quiet city in the Flanders region just west of Antwerp. An only child in a conservative family, he attended boarding school for eight years, a pedagogical choice which—to put him on the couch—created something of a division in Van Duysen, between the





work ethic and a desire for domesticity. “*Boarding school is all about rules and disciplines, it allows you to become more independent, I think—education-wise,*” he says. “*But on the other hand I remember coming home, it was a moment of pure pleasure. Being with your parents, in the gardens. I had a lot of animals, horses, rabbits, cats.*”

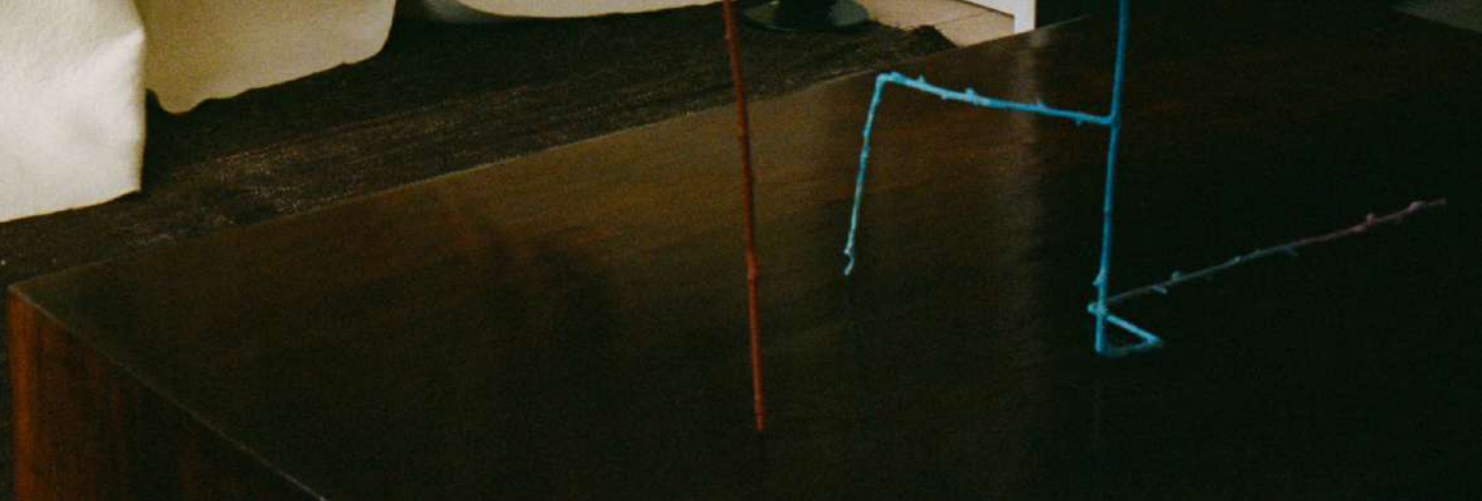
A student of Latin and Greek—as well as being “*very talkative, blab blab*”—the early expectation for Van Duysen, who attended theatre school and loved photography—was that he’d become a lawyer, the same profession as his grandfather.



His father, who worked in the carpet industry—big business in Flanders—was culturally-minded and had himself initially wanted to study architecture, but was not allowed. A generation later, Van Duysen decided he wanted to study fashion, and did the entrance exam without his parents’ knowledge. “*It was the beginning,*” says Van Duysen of a moment where designers such as Dries Van Noten and Martin Margiela, who would later achieve international fame as part of the Antwerp Six, were beginning to produce work. Architecture was ultimately pursued, encouraged for its transferability. Taking up his studies at the Higher Institute of Sint-Lucas in the Medieval City of Ghent, Van Duysen gave up his dream of becoming a fashion designer.

A sense of glamour returned when Van Duysen moved to Milan in 1985. The then “*epicentre for fashion and design,*” it was the heady, hyper colourful years of the Memphis Group, founded by Ettore Sottsass and Van Duysen was the first assistant of Aldo Cibic, one of its chief figures. It had a profound effect. “*What appealed to me were those primary forms, the primary language in pure geometry,*” says Van Duysen. “*The use of colours, of expressive materials and textures.*” He worked on a furniture collection





called The Standard. “It was rethinking and reworking the traditional typologies of furniture—you know a table with four legs, an archetypal sofa, a commode, just giving it little twists, without neglecting what a chair and a table and a sofa are,” he says. “I really, really loved that.”

Van Duysen returned to the lowlands of Belgium as the highs of postmodernism were cooling. “At the end of my studies I was in the history of deconstructivism,” says Van Duysen, citing Zaha Hadid and Coop Himmelb(l)au as among the proponents of this new movement’s fragmented and disjunctive style. Yet the designer continued thinking about those primary forms that had so inspired him in Italy and developed what would become his signature style. “I went further... into the essence of space, into the purity of furniture pieces, using natural materials and colours that were more linked with my culture from Flanders. The use of desaturated colours, more aged materials. Very soulful, very poetic, very sensual in a way.” He cites interior designer Jean-Michel Frank as an inspiration, comparing how he cut through the 1930s chintz with “simple forms and exquisite details,” with his own quiet riposte to the noise of postmodernism. Yet a sense of theatricality

remains—he describes each space as having “protagonists”: anthropomorphic stacks of books, artworks and grander items of furniture that flesh out the stages of his minimal *mise-en-scènes*.

Beyond his eponymous practice, Van Duysen is also creative director of Molteni&C. His pieces for the Italian furniture brand can certainly be described as ‘protagonists’—in particular the sofas (with names such as *Octave*, *Marteen* and *Cleo*) which have no business being squeezed into a corner. His designs for Molteni&C are the highest end of luxury. “Very Italian, very sophisticated in terms of materials and details,” says Van Duysen. On the flipside, Van Duysen has also collaborated with *Zara Home*, diffusing his style to a wider market. “It was a beautiful opportunity to dive into the archives of my work and understand what my DNA stands for.” Objects for sale include a marshmallowy loveseat and a more ascetic wooden lounge chair. Whilst the range is still on the expensive side, more affordable items include the ‘Object 03’ paperweight and salad servers. “I’m a democrat in heart and soul,” says the designer, before referring to himself as a





proper noun. “Everyone who knows and loves my work will be able to get access to pieces that are really Vincent Van Duysen.”

Van Duysen is conscious of himself as a figurehead of a brand. “I use Instagram so people know who I am, to show a little bit of my private world versus my professional work... I’m here to inspire people after all,” he says. Throughout Van Duysen’s career, his own spaces have always been the best advert for his work. Casa M, his home in Portugal and his house in Antwerp (photographed here for *Neptune*), a temple of serenity organised around a courtyard and dotted with characterful artworks —are the perfect distillations of his simple but flamboyant style. In the early 1990s, Ilse Crawford, then editor of *Elle Decoration*, saw a small picture of the architect’s living room in Antwerp and subsequently gave Van Duysen a 10-page spread called ‘Sensual Home’ in her magazine—press which helped to kickstart his career. The space’s pale, celestial calm still has the power to cut through algorithms, and in 2019 *T Magazine* even named it one of their 25 iconic rooms of all time.

Vincent Van Duysen's relationship to time is perhaps the key to his icon status. “People refer to projects that I did 30 or 35 years ago and it’s the same. When I look at it with my own eyes, it is still as it was, as if I designed it today.” This timelessness he believes he has achieved by using natural materials, and remaining “human-centric.” I ask him to define this. “It’s made for people to use, for people to feel it. It’s sensorial. They want to touch and feel and smell what I’m doing.” he explains. Whilst





being a self-confessed “modernist” and cites the likes of Mies Van Der Rohe, Louis Khan and Le Corbusier as chief influences—his modernism isn’t defined by a fixed chronology. “We can start from Egypt. The temple of Hatshepsut—is for me the ultimate example of modern architecture,” he explains. “I’m inspired by the simplicity of tribal architecture.” Van Duysen’s work has a primitive feel, the pull of its objects gravitational, the boundaries between inside and outside porous, a house as connected to the universe.

I ask Van Duysen if he has seen *The Brutalist*, Brady Corbet’s cinematic epic about Lászlo Toth, a fictional architect who is commissioned to build a community center by an American industrialist. He hasn’t had time yet—of course—but is keen to. I ask what he thinks the role of the architect is today—is it, like Toth, to struggle against the world in imposing a singular vision that will one day trickle down? “For me being an architect is being there to support and guarantee,” Van Duysen disagrees. “There always has to be a sense of surprise and the unexpected as well. But I’m really against architecture where it is only because of the sake of design. My language is pure and quiet and I aim for the well-being of each of us. I don’t have the feeling to go into a more futuristic or radical language.”

Van Duysen does have something in common with Corbet’s fictional architect, however. That is in his desire to build something with a spiritual dimension. “My dream is to create a little chapel—a sacred space dedicated to being disconnected,” he explains. For the moment he has been creating such spaces within himself—for the past X years he has practised transcendental meditation. “These are moments of self-love and self-care. It’s about awareness. You can have the same experience as in a church or a synagogue.” As he turns 63 this Spring, the prolific designer, who describes creativity as his “longevity” has nonetheless been working on the balance between his life and work. “I’m still controlling all my projects, but it’s about finding these moments of silence—phone away, nothing, not even music, nothing. This is the essence of where I am standing right now, and this is how I want to see and go further into the future.”

