

Dries Van Noten Spring 2020.

BEYOND

*RELATIVE TO ITS SMALL POPULATION,
BELGIUM BOASTS AN EXCEPTIONAL NUMBER
OF DESIGNERS NOW HEADING UP SOME OF
THE WORLD'S MOST PRESTIGIOUS FASHION
HOUSES. SO WHAT MAKES THE COUNTRY SUCH
FERTILE GROUND FOR CREATIVE TALENT?*

words TESS DE VIVIE DE RÉGIE

EXPECTATIONS

Photography: Richard Bond/Getty Images.



In March 1986, a group of six plucky fashion graduates from Antwerp's Royal Academy of Fine Arts – Dries Van Noten, Ann Demeulemeester, Walter Van Beirendonck, Marina Yee, Dirk Van Saene and Dirk Bikkembergs – rented a van and headed to the British Designer Show in London in a bid to draw international attention to their collections. Their gamble worked. Within days, all “the Antwerp Six”, as they were dubbed by the anglophone press, had scored their first orders from international retailers – including Barneys New York, no less.

The group studied under Linda Loppa – then head of the fashion department at Antwerp's Academy – who today works as a consultant. “The six designers [brought] new aesthetics to the existing fashion scene, then dominated by Jean Paul Gaultier, Claude Montana or Thierry Mugler [in France] or in Italy by new names such as Gianni Versace and Dolce & Gabbana,” Loppa reflects. “The Belgian designers were more conceptual, less show-off and more intellectual following the aesthetic of Yohji Yamamoto and Comme des Garçons.”

The Antwerp Six placed Belgium firmly on the fashion map, and some four decades on, the country's domination of the industry is remarkable. Belgian-Italian Anthony Vaccarello has, since 2016, been creative director at Saint Laurent, while Franco-Belgian Matthieu Blazy was appointed artistic director at Chanel in December last year, after three years as the creative director of Bottega Veneta. After stints at Jil Sander, Christian Dior and Calvin Klein, Raf Simons – creative director of women's haute couture, ready-to-wear and accessories at Dior from 2012-15 – has, since 2020, acted as co-creative director at Prada, alongside Miuccia Prada. Pieter Mulier, a disciple of Simons, now helms Maison Azzedine Alaïa.

It's impressive stuff for a country of just shy of 12 million people – less than half the population of Australia – comprised of Dutch-speaking Flanders in the north, Francophone Wallonia in the south and a small German-speaking enclave in the east. And for a relatively young nation, too, Belgium having declared independence from the Netherlands only in 1830.

Among Belgian designers to have attained major success in their own name, there is, of course, Brussels-born-and-raised Diane von Fürstenberg, who revolutionised womenswear with the launch of her iconic wrap dress in 1974 – a versatile piece that managed to be both practical and chic. Van Noten's mastery of combining vivid colours, motifs and textures attracted a fanbase that includes Queen Mathilde of Belgium, Michelle Obama and Cate Blanchett. Van Noten sold a majority stake in his brand to Spanish fashion and fragrance company Puig in 2018 and retired as creative director in March 2024, with Julian Klausner appointed his successor. Demeulemeester, who retired in 2013, garnered a reputation for excellent tailoring and androgynous silhouettes, often in a black-heavy palette. At the 2025 Met Gala, Charli

xcx wore a sharply cut feathered blazer from the label – which is now owned by Italian entrepreneur Claudio Antonioli – paired with an accompanying waistcoat and headpiece.

A contemporary of the Antwerp Six, the reclusive Martin Margiela co-founded Maison Martin Margiela in 1988 alongside entrepreneur Jenny Meirens after cutting his design teeth at Jean Paul Gaultier. The house's otherworldly aesthetic plays with volume and proportion and often uses unexpected materials, like seatbelts and fragments of porcelain. His tenure as creative director of womenswear at Hermès from 1997 to 2003 is remembered for its sleek, pared-back silhouettes, more quietly refined than the experimental pieces he produced under his own brand, which was sold to Italian conglomerate Only The Brave (OTB) in 2002, with Margiela eventually stepping away altogether in 2009.

One explanation for Belgium's strong output of creative talent is that the country is serviced by two world-renowned fashion and arts schools. There's the more famous Academy in Antwerp, but the École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Visuels de La Cambre in Brussels – commonly referred to as La Cambre – is where Blazy and Vaccarello underwent their training.

Today, American-born Brandon Wen is creative director of the fashion department at the Academy in Antwerp. "For me, one of the main things that defines Belgian design is the mix of tradition and [the] eclectic. A common thread amongst Belgian designers is a strong understanding of garment making, combined with curiosity and experimentation that comes from all the things that exist outside of Belgium," says Wen.

"Belgian design is not burdened by its history; creating can happen in a way that is informed by the past but not blocked by it," reflects Loppa, who during her tenure at the Academy also trained Raf Simons and Georgian Demna Gvasalia, the co-founder of Vetements and creative director at Balenciaga for the past decade, recently appointed creative director at Gucci.

Etienne Russo has been producing fashion shows and events with his creative agency, Villa Eugénie, for more than 30 years; recent projects include the Chanel, Hermès and Moncler Fall 2025 presentations. "We're a small country with multiple languages, diverse influences and a deep-rooted tradition in both craftsmanship and avant-garde thinking," posits Russo. "Here, designers aren't obsessed with commerciality first; they're obsessed with ideas. [Belgian style] is thoughtful, often conceptual and always a bit subversive. Whether it's the radical minimalism of someone like Martin Margiela or the romantic deconstruction of Dries Van Noten, there's always a sense of depth and narrative."

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Born in Belgium and raised on Sydney's Northern Beaches, Sonny Vandeveld is today an in-demand backstage photographer on the international fashion week circuit. "It's not just the one thing," he muses of what sets Belgian style apart. "It's a combination of things: the nightclub and music scene, mixed in with fashion and what is going on in architecture and interior design, as well."

Vandeveld suspects that repeatedly being written off as the underdog gives Belgians the drive to surpass the achievements of their peers from more powerful countries. "Within Belgian culture, there is almost a [feeling] of inferiority, because you've always been looked down on as that small country," he suggests.

It's a sentiment that inspires "this deep-rooted rebelliousness against being labelled le petit Belge – the little Belgian" – an insult Vandeveld has heard French people deploy. "It's like, Don't call me that. I'll show you how good I am."

Among the new Belgians making waves, take note of Deinzebased Meryll Rogge – previously of Marc Jacobs and Dries Van Noten – whose line is stocked at Net-A-Porter, Harvey Nichols and luxury multi-brand boutique Camargue in Brisbane. Her cult favourite boxer shorts have been worn by Rihanna at Coachella in 2024 and Dua Lipa.

"[Rogge's] experience in the industry combined with her design talent makes her very well prepared to do big things," says Wen.

Brussels-based Marie Adam-Leenaerdt founded her eponymous brand in 2022 and was nominated for the LVMH Prize in 2024. "[She] brings a fresh, cerebral approach to silhouette and construction," remarks Russo. Villa Eugénie has collaborated with her since her first show post-graduation. "There's a purity and precision in her vision that's incredibly compelling. She challenges convention with subtle but powerful gestures."

In January this year, Bruges-born Glenn Martens was announced as the successor to John Galliano at Maison Margiela, a post that Galliano had held since 2014; Margiela himself had stepped back from the house in 2009. Martens had helmed Paris-based label Y/PROJECT from 2013 (it closed in early 2025), as well as Italian denim brand Diesel since 2020. "He basically made Diesel cool and relevant again," reflects Vandeveld of Martens' wave-making tenure at the label.

If you're in the game of predicting the future faces poised to head up the major international fashion houses, it might pay to keep tabs on who is emerging from those famous Belgian art schools. "Just jot down names and see where they pop up," suggests Vandeveld. "Because I can guarantee you, they're going to pop up somewhere." HB



CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT Ann Demeulemeester Spring 2025; Raf Simons Men's Fall 2018; Dries Van Noten Spring 2020; Maison Margiela Spring 2017.

Photography: opposite page from top left: Vittorio Zunino Celotto; Frazer Harrison; Richard Bond; Estrop, all Getty Images.