

TRAVELSTYLE

Footwear by Belgian designers like Walter van Belrendonck and Kris van Assche is just as hot as the clothes



Rocks & Frocks

Belgium is a perfect fusion of the magnificently old and the fashionably new. By Jacquelin Carnegie

Belgium has a colorful past and a vibrant present, stunning architecture and delicious food. Belgian chocolates, waffles, fries and beer are world famous. Belgium also has a centuries-old connection to fashion. Back in the late Middle Ages, wool was imported from England and woven into fine cloth sold all over Europe, ushering in an industrial golden age.

But in more recent times, fashionable wear was dominated by Parisian and Italian styles. It wasn't until 20 years ago that Belgian designers began making a mark on the fashion scene.

In the 1980s, the fashion school at Antwerp's Royal Academy of Fine Arts renewed special emphasis on creativity. This produced a group of avant-garde fashion designers that became known as the "Antwerp Six."

These designers—Walter van Beirendonck, Ann Demeulemeester, Dries van Noten, Dirk van Saene, Dirk Bikkembergs and Marina Yee—pooled their resources and showed their respective collections together at the British Designer Show in London in the late 1980s; they were a smash hit. Although their work was very different, they got labeled the "Antwerp Six" by the British fashion press (who couldn't pronounce their names).



Diamond pin designed to benefit the children's charity Action Innocence. Many raw diamonds are sourced from Belgium

Kris van Assche worked for YSL and Dior Homme before starting his own stunningly-beautiful line

RIGHT: IMAGE BY PATRICE STABLE; ABOVE RIGHT: IMAGE BY GAËTAN BERNARD

What this group did have in common were inventive styles that combined Belgium's impeccable craftsmanship with pioneering designs. With their success, the "Sixers" established Antwerp as a place to watch for innovative fashion design.

The buzz attracted talented fashion students from all over the world to study at the Antwerp Fashion Academy and also at La Cambre, Brussels' fashion school.

Since that first inspirational group, new generations of Belgian designers have entered the field: Raf Simons, Veronique Branquinho, Tim van Steenberg, Kris van Assche and Annemie Verbeke, just to name a few.

Annemie Verbeke is a popular designer with shops in both Antwerp and Brussels



Inventive styles that combined Belgium's impeccable craftsmanship with pioneering designs

are just as interesting."

In Brussels, the shops of the established designers and the newcomers can be found in the delightful Dansaert district. As you stroll past beautiful buildings, cafés and art galleries, you'll find boutiques for Martin Margiela (considered the "7th Sixer") and Annemie Verbeke, as well as the cute Kat en Muis shop showcasing children's clothing by Belgian designers. But the best place to start is Stijl on rue Antoine Dansaert. This store was the first to carry collections from all the new, hot Belgian designers.

In Antwerp, you'll find high-fashion boutiques in the Sint-Andries neighborhood. The "Sixers" have remained true to their town with Dries van Noten's flagship store, Modepaleis, and van Beirendonck's shop, Walter. Pay homage at Louis; this store launched the careers of all of the Sixers. And stop in to Coccodrillo, which stocks the Antwerp designers' hip footwear.

If you'd like to spot the next big designers before anyone else, head to Belgium in early June. That's when Antwerp's Royal Academy and Brussels' La Cambre hold fashion shows for their graduating classes. Don't pack your bags, just bring empty suitcases!

Tim van Steenberg was named "Best Belgian Designer" 2009 by the Elle Style Awards. It's easy to see why



While French designers present clothes that make a splash on the runways, Belgian designers create clothes you might actually want to wear. And there's a strong contingent of female designers, too.

In the lovely fashion districts in both Antwerp and Brussels, shopping is a treat. It's easy to find your way, but to get the most out of the experience, you can hire a style consultant/personal shopper to take you around. Not only are they knowledgeable about fashion, they know the best stores (and the shop managers); they even know some of the designers and can introduce you.

"The Antwerp Six were great," says Brussels style consultant/personal shopper Linda van Waesberge. "They put Belgium on the fashion map, but that was 20 years ago. The young designers on the scene now



Editor's Note: For more information on shopping in Antwerp, visit antwerpshoppingstreets.be; Shopping in Brussels: modobruuxellae.be; Personal Shoppers: Linda van Waesberge (in Brussels) linda@vanwaesberge.be; Tanguy Ottomer (in Antwerp) info@tanguyottomer.com; Royal Fashion Academy: antwerp-fashion.be; La Cambre: lacambre.be ♦