

Designs for life: How Belgium has borrowed, adapted and pioneered new forms



BELGIUM

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While Belgian design has deep roots, it's always moved with the times

Belgium has punched above its weight artistically ever since the fledgling state was founded nearly two centuries ago. Surrounded on all sides by established cultural juggernauts, the Belgians quickly learned to borrow, adapt and pioneer new forms, while the country's geographic and historical situation at the heart of Europe has facilitated the kind of exchange on which international trends are founded. Nowhere is this more evident than in Belgium's design scene, celebrated annually by Design September. The month-long festival recently wrapped its 12th edition with an epic programme of more than 100 events across Brussels.

Contemporary Belgian design has deep roots. The country first distinguished itself in the Belle Epoque with the flowering of Art Nouveau. Architects like Victor Horta and Henry van de Velde pioneered a new ethos marrying the fine and applied arts. Henceforth the beautiful would be useful and the useful beautiful. Cutting-edge projects like Horta's Hôtel Solvay and Van de Velde's own Bloemenwerf private home were more than just buildings. They were total works of art in which architectural plan and interior design were integrated and every room filled with customtailored fixtures.

Belgian design reached new heights after World War Two, spurred by economic prosperity and technological optimism. Furniture designer Jules Wabbes reflected the zeitgeist with his sleek, space-

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World's Fair in 1958, the landmark epitomises postwar Belgium's faith in science, technology and contemporary design to deliver continuously rising living standards.

The Atomium's own art and design museum, Adam, is a temple to the heady enthusiasm of the period with its comprehensive permanent collection of space-age plastics and a temporary exhibition situating mid-century modernism in the history of Belgian design.

Not only is this heritage valued as art history, there's still a strong demand for works from this golden age. Among Design September's partners are 17 galleries specialising in vintage design.

Year-round celebrations

Beyond the specialist circles of Design September, amateur enthusiasts across Belgium hold regular vintage markets and themed events from the monthly Brussels Vintage Market to Liège's annual *Marché Vintage*.

For the rest of the Belgian design world, time has not stood still. That world has grown exponentially since then. New designers and new labels have entered the fray while the original pioneers have evolved to keep pace. Some legacy brands, like Kewlox, have managed to remain at the cutting edge of technology and taste for over half a century.

Indeed, there are few Belgian brands with as much legacy as Kewlox. The company traces its roots back to the seminal year 1958 when, company lore holds, an English designer named Kewley pioneered a process of interlocking units that required no glue, nails or screws: the Kew-lock. The patent was acquired the following year by Belgian entrepreneur Maurice Le Clercq and applied to modular furniture.

Kewlox has expanded across Western Europe in recent years, thanks to its appeal to a new generation of consumers. When the company began production in the early 1960s, the values embodied in its products were niche concerns; today, ecological sustainability and local engagement (not to mention longevity and user-friendliness) are very much in demand. Kewlox was one of several Belgian brands recently celebrated at one of France's most prestigious annual design events, *Maison&Objet*.

Shining a spotlight

But one needn't cross national borders to find world-class design showcases. Belgium's own Design September has grown in the past dozen years into a highlight of the European design calendar.

Originally conceived as a week-long promotion of a few local labels, over the course of a dozen years it has evolved into an international event shining a spotlight on the entirety of the country's rich and varied design scene. This year's programme delivered over 100 design related-events, from exhibitions to lectures to studio open houses to pop-up stores to parties.

One of the annual highlights is the Commerce Design Awards. Launched in Montreal in 1995, the concept recognises local shops, restaurants, offices and hotels that have opened their spaces up to the

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Last year's edition of Design September also celebrated Belgium's delegation to Milan Design Week 2017 with a reprise of the exhibitions Belgitude, the New Belgians and Photo Installation by Laetitia Bica. The exhibitions were selected and promoted by the national design alliance Belgium Is Design, comprised of regional organisations – including Wallonie-Bruxelles Design Mode (WBDM) – and tasked with communicating the country's diversity and talent on an international level.

Belgitude

Belgitude was a who's who of not just Belgium's design but its business as well. The project paired 10 established names like lighting designer Nathalie Dewez and furniture designer Xavier Lust with manufacturers from across the country. Dewez joined forces with the veteran crystal crafters of Val Saint Lambert to create three unique crystal and LED lamps. Lust paired with luxury leather workshop Charles Schambourg by Nacarat to conceive the Bee chair, inspired by the most organised of insects and made of aluminium and leather.

Bica's accompanying photographic installation documents the Belgitude collaborations while adding her own artistic enhancement. In just a few short years, the Liège-born, Brussels-based artist has made a name for herself by documenting the Brussels arts world around her.

The Milan presentation was rounded out by the New Belgians. The exhibition was presented in the context of Milan's SaloneSatellite, a platform dedicated exclusively to young and innovative designers. It was an opportunity for WBDM to showcase the wealth of rising talent in Wallonia and Brussels. Six designers were tapped to show their latest work in the fields of lighting, furniture and textiles. The common theme – Less Is More – reflects the current concern for economy and sustainability.

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