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Creative thinking: Meet the artisans reviving arts and crafts in Brussels and Wallonia

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Sarah Crew and Karen McHugh



They are the unsung heroes of the local economy. Inspired by their creativity, drive and passion, these artists benefit everyone in the community. Wallonia has long had a history of traditional skills, and in recent years there has been a remarkable renaissance of hand-crafted and locally made products. This awakening interest in provenance and authenticity challenges consumers to think more about what they buy. Another motivation for acquiring high-quality crafts is the stories behind individual pieces. All these artisans love their craft and the privileged reputation they have with their clients, who are increasingly coming from abroad.

BRUSSELS

Tamawa The Bakelite ball's shape was what attracted Hubert Verstraeten to it as a source material for jewellery and design. "It's a universal form, it belongs to every kind of culture," he says. Made from the hard plastic used for snooker balls, each sphere is manufactured in Belgium and then incorporated into designs for his jewellery - rings and necklaces, but also watches, coat-stands and peppermills.

Lilù operates from their atelier, from which they sell their handbags on Rue du Bailli. "We offer tailor-made options to clients - they can pick a design for a bag and we make it in the leather they choose." They're not after world domination; rather, their ideal evolution is "to keep creation in our workshops: one or two more points of sales and to keep the direct contact with our clientele."

Niyona Based in the centre of Brussels in Rue Dansaert, Niyona styles itself as a concept store as well as creator of leather goods. "We had a desire to return to the source, towards local expertise and production," says owner Jonathan Wieme. They also offer workshops, courses and repairs at the premises. And the meaning behind Hello James, their flagship store? Named simply for their son.

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Malakine Catherine Malvaux aims to create a jewellery line that stands out from the tradition of everyday wearable jewels. "My sources of inspiration are nature, animals. Each piece tells a joyful and colourful story." Currently with a presence in Belgium and St Tropez, Malakine intends to expand to Paris and London in the near future, and tends toward individual styling. "We privilege a private clientele, with the idea of creating tailor-made jewels."

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Atelier Van Tesch Magali Tesch set up her atelier in 2007, making high-end jewellery that can be worn every day. Inspired by the architecture of Bruges, she remains faithful to traditional techniques; everything is handmade. "I dream of seeing my jewellery in the windows of big jewellery shops; of working in Paris and London," she says. Tesch takes on the UK market at the Spring Fair in Birmingham next February.

Maison Bernard Depoorter For Bernard Depoorter, fashion is a vocation. He was inspired in childhood by a collection of designer dresses discovered in his attic, and by his stylish mother: "a lady who liked wearing beautiful clothes." He specialises in haute couture, with a dramatic yet timeless style, and has been worn by Princess Mathilde on an official trip abroad. He is now also developing his ready-to-wear line.

HAINAUT

Eric Parmentier With Angelina Jolie among his celebrity clients and an order book full for the next two years, pocket knife craftsman Eric Parmentier has no need to advertise. As one of the finest artisans in his field, he uses only quality materials – mother of pearl, steel, mammoth ivory – to create exclusive and elegant objects that feature his own patented opening and closing mechanism. "They are not at all aggressive," he says. "They appeal to those with an adventurous spirit."

Emilienne et Paula Each of Caroline Crunelle's colourful handmade bags is an exclusive creation. After years of doing patchwork as a hobby, the mother-of-four from Mons launched her business after encouragement from family and friends. "I'm passionate about fabric and I love working with such a diversity of materials. Each bag is unique." Crunelle sells her "chic, yet practical bags" via fairs, private sales and online.

Pascal Jeanjean The bibliophile and master paper-maker designs and makes personalised paper for companies and institutions such the Louvre in Paris. "Orders are so diverse that I like to meet the client first," he says. "The reflection, vision and conception required is similar to that of a chef inventing a dish. It requires personality," says the craftsman, considered one the best handmade paper-makers in the world.

NAMUR

A fleur d'Ame As a florist, Isabelle Marloye was inspired by seeing how clients expressed their emotions in selecting flowers. After studying as a herbalist in Canada, she discovered floral elixirs and has since developed a therapeutic business in Namur that explores the link between flowers and well-being. As well as personal coaching and workshops, she shows corporate clients how "creating a natural perfume is a fun way of boosting self-confidence."

Mosaic Studio From his Dinant workshop, Marq Rawls crafts original handmade mosaics for interiors and exteriors (pictured). Combining Roman and Byzantine tradition with contemporary designs, he creates unique panels, walls and floors in crystal glass for clients in France, Russia, Poland, the Baltic states and South Korea. "We are not in the business of quantity but quality and durability," he says, "as well as the beauty and exceptional nature of our projects."

Lady Moon Monthie Mulquin, aka Moon, swapped life as a teacher for that of a stylist. As well as her own range of 100% Made in Belgium clothing for women, men and children, she runs creative workshops and collaborates with other artists in the region. "It's important for me to have a label that is also a lifestyle concept; made-to-measure clothes in limited series and bright and subdued colours."

LIEGE

Philippe Ongena The stone sculptor's creations range from the decorative to the practical, comprising barbecues and garden tables as well as sculptures and fountains. "The inspiration for me is the movement of the water on the stone," he says. His works appear in gardens and parks across the country. Now approaching retirement, Ongena will continue his trade but plans to spend more time on creative pieces.

Louise Kopij For Louise Kopij, starting her own jewellery atelier was a creative path towards freedom and knowledge: "I love working with my hands, translating the images that come into my head," she says. Among her signature styles is the use of feathers in her designs. With two points of sale already in New York, Louise will also be presenting her work at the national popup store this winter in Hong Kong.

Pauquet The son of a jeweller, Olivier Pauquet showed an early interest in his father's trade and studied as a gemologist, culminating in a coveted Lauréat du Travail. "I am heir to careful craftsmanship, but I'm also constantly seeking new ideas," he says. Pearls are Pauquet's forte, and his collection includes necklaces, rings and pendants, with a preference for opals. All are on display at his

shop in Liège.

LUXEMBOURG

Françoise Lesage The Ardennes-based ceramic artist draws on her background as an engraver to mix techniques, whether it be for designing lamps and working with porcelain, or making original floor tiles for architect-designed homes. The latter dominates her schedule. "I don't have time to go looking for business," she says, "so professional fairs such as Maison & Objets in Paris are really important."

La Boîte à Papa When Stéphanie Mathu was inspired to give her husband a surprise present after the birth of their daughter, the seed of a business idea was planted. The couple launched an online business compiling original gift boxes for births and any celebratory event. A shop now adjoins their village home from where her mother, sister and two other dressmakers make all the textile elements. "We're a real family business," she says.

Albert Hardiquest

Uniting antique lovers with a specific piece of furniture, painting or object is the motivation for Albert Hardiquest, based in Vielsalm and Brussels. Depending on the object's age and condition, his team of specialists renovate from start to finish. "I would like to develop a professional network to share different techniques with other businesses," he says. He is inspired "by imagining the previous life of an object".

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