





Citizens of the *World*

*What unites a
trio of Belgium's
leading designers?
Anything but
national borders.*

By Fiona Rattray

Portrait by Raimond Wouda

THAT'S THE FUNNY THING ABOUT famous Belgians. You wait around for ages, and then three come along at once. No, wait—that's buses. The funny thing about Belgians is there aren't any famous ones, unless of course you count Audrey Hepburn, Diane von Furstenberg, Tintin, Hercule Poirot, Jacques Brel, Brueghel, Dries van Noten, Maarten Van Severen, and Rene Magritte. The truth is this tiny country has always been good at breeding famous people; it has just done so quietly. These days, however, Belgium is churning out world-class creative talent at such a rate that it's finally starting to get the recognition it deserves.

Which is why I find myself in a leafy Brussels park one morning drinking coffee with three of the most happening furniture designers in the country, trying to get to the bottom of what's going on here and why everyone—from manufacturers to magazines—is so keen to talk to them. Only it's proving a little trickier than I thought, because if Xavier Lust, Alain Berteau, and the one whose name sounds like a Middle Eastern pop star—Casimir—have anything in common, it's nothing so obvious as a design aesthetic.

previous spread, from left Casimir, Xavier Lust, and Alain Berteau in Brussels on August 26, 2006

right, from top Lust's 4 Pattes table, Bwb chair for Zeritalia, Rainy Day In Switzerland umbrella holder for De Padova (white), and Paso Doble umbrella holder for Driade (red); opposite Lust's Credence cabinet for De Padova.

Lust, for example, with his Ibiza tan and Daniel Craig looks, specializes in pared-down, angular furniture with superb detailing. Open his striking lacquered Credence cabinet, with its **supersmooth** corners and bulging, shiny doors, and you'll find a set of hinges so handsome they put the average fixture to shame. At 36, he is best known for the piece that made him a star in Belgium and beyond, the single-sheet aluminum PicNik table he designed with Dirk Wynants for Extremis, one of the young manufacturers fueling the country's creative upsurge. The table is made using the signature, top-secret metal-folding technique he devised, which lends his furniture its strong but remarkably thin profile and its deceptively simple look. Later, I will visit Lust's studio via a nippy trip in his convertible Smart Car and look at his new range of folded-steel street furniture that's currently being road tested by the local citizenry. He lives like he designs: His furniture, plus some impressive interior design projects, all originates from one small room in his studio/apartment, a charming, rough-hewn space above a restaurant on the outskirts of Brussels.

Berteau, on the other hand, is currently renovating a glorious five-story period townhouse near the Royal Palace that is just big enough to contain both his office and his young family. Charming, trained as an architect, and the youngest of the three at 35, he does a neat line in adaptable, thoughtful furniture designs with the faintest of retro undertones. If the veneered, bent-ply surface of his Drum table light is familiar, for example, the ingenious on-off device—just tap the translucent top—is decidedly modern. Berteau himself is fizzing with creative energy and enthusiasm, and you'd never guess from his bulging portfolio that he has been designing furniture for only three years. He shows me his sketchbook, which is jammed with pencil drawings of ideas for new products. "I want to do everything," he says. "Luggage, tableware..." Compared with architecture, he says, furniture design is easy. "When you're working on a house, there are thousands of problems to solve, but in a chair there are perhaps 10." His dualistic career gives him another edge as well: Specifying furniture for his buildings means he knows what the market is missing. He came up with the runaway-successful Tab chair for Bulo in 2004—which features an innovative cantilevered backrest perfect for leaning, perching, work-

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ing, or napping on—after spotting a gap for a more relaxed meeting-room chair. Berteau's latest project, a polygon-shape cardboard stool with a zip-on Kvadrat fabric cover for which the packaging is also the structure, taps into one of his firm beliefs that "you can be both relevant and sustainable," and at €100 (\$126) it will appeal, he hopes, to young people as an entry-level design object. To ice the cake, he has just been given the inaugural Designer of the Year award at Interieur 06, Belgium's prestigious biannual contemporary trade fair held in October in Kortrijk.

Manufacturers may be lining up to work with Berteau and Lust—the latter already has Driacle, De Padova, and MDF Italia in his portfolio, while the former is the darling of young Belgian companies such as Feld—but the enigmatic Casimir, impish, shaggy-haired, and the only Flemish, hence Dutch-speaking, designer of the three, says he long ago vowed "never to work for an editor." Having successfully plied his trade as a designer/maker since the '90s, the 40-year-old launched the internationally distributed production house Vlaemsch in 2004, where he could be part designer, part editor himself, while making use of industrial manufacturing techniques.

If Lust and Berteau's work is relatively commercial, Vlaemsch promotes a more sideways-looking product altogether. It's both economical of method (Casimir's flat-pack 2004 Paperclip table goes up in seconds and consists of five cut sheets of Trespa and some binder clips) and big on wry humor (its latest product, the Leather & Plastic chair by Front, marries a dirt-cheap, white plastic garden chair with a seductive black hide cover), both paradoxical symptoms of what Casimir characterizes as the Flemish vibe. Among the half-dozen international designers who have joined the Vlaemsch fold are the American Leon Ransmeier and the up-and-coming young Belgian Royal Collage of Art graduate, Sylvain Willenz; Casimir plans to add a new product to Vlaemsch's catalog every 6 to 10 weeks.

If it's not style these three talented Belgians have in common, it's independence. "I don't feel like a 'Belgian, Brussels-based designer.' I'm a European," says Berteau. Lust agrees: Having borders with France, Holland, Germany, and Luxembourg, as well as the sea, means that "this is not a country with a big identity. We have lots of influences. We are citizens of the world."

While these two seem almost resistant to the label of Belgian designer, Casimir has another idea. "Belgian design does exist, but it's Flemish," he says, insisting that all the biggest names—among them the late, Ghent-based furniture designer Maarten Van Severen—hail from his half of the country. United in their admiration for Van Severen's authentic, hands-dirty-in-the-workshop approach, the trio concur that if you had to identify a distinctive, traditional Belgian style, then it should be the slightly austere, sturdy Flemish version.

Actually Lust, Berteau, and Casimir are getting quite good at consensus by now. When the waitress arrives to take our lunch order, they all pick ravioli, and suddenly we're on a roll. The one thing that really does unite Belgians, they say, almost in unison, is that they value quality. "Like the chocolate," says Lust, waving the little slab that came with his coffee. They also apparently eat and drink exceptionally well, love entertaining, and live in big houses that they spend a lot of money on. His career has only just begun, but Berteau prizes longevity over all. "I'm looking for relevance to people's lives," he says. "If a product is beautiful, that's cool, but if that's all it is, what's the

opposite Casimir's Schaal No.1 table and Zetel No.1 lounge; *left, from top* Front's Leather & Plastic chair for Vlaemsch and Casimir's Paperclip and Trestle tables, also for Vlaemsch.

point? In 20 years people will be embarrassed to look at it." It's the same sort of anti-fad stance that got their colleagues in the Belgian fashion world noticed.

From the outside, I tell them, it appears that Belgian furniture design is emerging from the shadow of the agenda-setting Dutch. They nod politely before joining in on a swift savaging of the gimmickry and gags of contemporary Dutch design. They're teasing, of course. It's not that they don't like it, they say, or that they don't admire Dutch designers' talent for marketing—Droog and Moooi in particular—just that they feel they don't have anything in common with their neighbors. Likewise for France. Berteau's first big break came by way of funding from VIA, the influential French organization that encourages innovation in furniture design. He says he admires that country's ambition and intellectual approach to design, even if it does go a bit far sometimes. "If you're not conceptual in Paris, nobody cares about you," he says, half-jokingly. But what he disapproves of is the French love of hype: "We don't care about stardom here," he adds.

There's a post-prandial lull and I start fiddling with the plastic table decoration, a fake flower floating in a lake of clear resin. All eyes fall at once on the offending item. "This is so nasty," I say. "It's definitely not Flemish," quips Casimir. "I can tell you that for sure." ^

Fiona Rattray, a freelance writer based in London, is the former deputy editor of Blueprint and former style editor of The Observer.

far right Alain Berteau's Tab chairs for Bulo; *right, from top* Berteau's Longitude table for Wildspirit, Fence chair for Feld, and Cover stools for Montis.

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