

FROM BELGIUM WITH LIGHT

BELGIANS (ALMOST) INVENTED LIGHT...

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Curator: Benjamin Stoz

What lies at the heart of this particular relationship which Belgians have with light? We know that our skies often lack luminosity. We also know that ours is the most “lit up” country in the world, owing to our extensive roadway lighting. But did Belgians really invent light? Of course, the invention of electric lighting had nothing to do with Belgium. This is just an excuse to consider one, specific aspect in the history of design “made in Belgium”. **In the 1980s, Belgium and more specifically Flanders was where numerous professional lighting manufacturers established their activities and within a few years, they became international references.** Although other Belgian companies were already operating in the market, including Schröder in Liège [1927], Etap Lighting in Antwerp [1949] and Light in Ninove [1947], **a cluster of manufacturers formed in the region of Courtrai:** Modular Lighting Instruments in 1980, Wever & Ducreé in 1985 and Delta Light in 1989.

What were the factors or rather the circumstances which enabled this new sector to develop and grow? One of the primary reasons for this boom in the lighting sector was the favourable economic climate in Flanders in the latter half of the 20th century. This growth hinged on three basic features: the concentration of the majority of foreign investment in the Flemish region and the orientation of industries towards growth markets, combined with a particular focus on research and development. Generally speaking, **the north of the country became a spawning ground for new businesses and the development of new activity sectors.**

In the 1980s, although certain companies were established elsewhere [Kreon in Opglabbeek and Waco in Gavere], there was a **significant concentration of manufacturers around Courtrai** (Modular Lighting Instruments, Wever & Ducreé, Delta Light and later Tal in 1992 and 100% Light in 2004). Indeed since the 1960s, South-West Flanders has experienced a high level of autonomous industrial development. According to the Belgian economist Bernard Musyck¹, *the development of this highly industrialised region arose in fact from the mobilisation of capital and the skills of its population, along with local self-regulation.* Between 1958 and 1989, four economic areas dominated the Courtrai region: textiles-clothing, wood, food, **metalworking and related industries.** Since 1980, metal transformation and the electrical equipment sectors have been booming. The proximity of these businesses offers the lighting sector the possibility to work locally and to have the necessary materials and above all the skills and know-how at hand to make their products.

We can also see that **the development of lighting design is highly bound up with technological advances.** In the same way as the boom associated with Edison’s invention of the lightbulb at the end of the 19th century, halogen lamps, LEDs and more recently OLEDs have boosted the lighting market over recent years. Paul Rommens [founder

¹ Musyck Bernard. Géographie de l’industrialisation autonome dans le sud de la Flandre Occidentale (Belgique) / Autonomous industrialisation in SouthWest Flanders. In: Revue de géographie de Lyon, vol. 70, n°1, 1995. *Les districts industriels : traditions et innovations.* pp. 35-43.

of Modular) was one of the first producers to import the *MR16* halogen lamp (with a multifaceted reflector). He also imported a range of light fittings from Europe and soon realised that he could manufacture these devices himself. Joining forces with Jan Meyfroidt, they created a varied range of emblematic lighting systems for Modular, including *Modupoint* (1984) and *Definitif* (1986). The public's growing demand for these new objects and the quite particular attention given by contracting authorities to lighting and its various applications sealed the success and general appetite for these new, industrial goods.

Since the 1990s, the evolution of technologies, informatics and home automation has consolidated the position of lighting creators.

In the space of a few years, this sector has become a truly Belgian specialisation. It is characterised by technical, efficient lighting, whose specialist know-how is gradually being tinged with emotion. The firms hailed for the technicity of their products are introducing new lines into their collections without surrendering to the temptation of ornamentation. Their ranks have been joined by such renowned designers as Damien Bihr for Schröder, Maarten Van Severen for Light and Luc Vincent for Modular.

The growth of the cluster in Courtrai and its rapid international acclaim has enabled other brands to establish themselves in Flanders. Tal (Pittem) in 1992, Orbit (Puurs) in 1997, Dark (Maldegem) in 2000, Trizo21 (Nevele) in 2001 and TossB (Zeebrugge) in 2002, are just a few.

Of course the individual stories of each brand have contributed to their development. In 1947, Norbert Joris worked for 6 months in an electrical winding factory in Antwerp, where he didn't earn a penny. When the company went bankrupt, the Belgian engineer decided to buy it to establish Etap Lighting in 1949, a firm specialising in professional lighting. Later, the terrible fire at the Innovation department store in 1967 and the resulting reappraisal of safety standards led the company to reinvent itself in emergency lighting. The conversion or reorientation of existing companies is commonplace in the various cases mentioned here. An electrical appliance store for Modular, an electrical equipment distribution company (Electra) created by Franck Deceunick at Wever & Ducré and a hi-fi and discotheque lighting solutions shop called Stereohouse was set up by Paul Ameloot, founder of Delta Light.

THE PIONEERS: A HISTORICAL INTERLUDE

What happened before 1980? Did the evolution of Belgian design have any influence on the lighting market as we know it today? If we take a closer look at the successive movements and styles in the history of Belgian design, three crucial moments enable us to identify how it has shaped contemporary lighting design.

- **Horta: integration and magic**

The pioneer of Belgian Art Nouveau, Victor Horta devised the first lighting system integrated within the architecture, where each light fixture is envisaged according to the space which it has to illuminate. For Françoise Aubry, curator of the Musée Horta, the Belgian architect's contribution to the "minor" history of lighting also lies in the otherworldly, magical aspect of his creations. The architect promotes colours and decors through technical solutions tinged with a subtle poetry and sensuality. This exploration of the "magic" in lighting is still a concern for certain contemporary designers.

- **Social furnishings: freedom of form and modularity**

In 1953, in his interior design for the Kiel show-apartments in Antwerp, Willy Van Der Meeren proposed free, mobile furnishings that could be adapted to the open spaces advocated by modernist architects. With practical assistance from industry under the Tubax brand, Van Der Meeren created a range of innovative, rational pieces of furniture in a series of free forms and bright colours.

- **Industrial design: technicity at the service of humans**

The concept of industrial design has been developing in Belgium since 1954, but it achieved maximum visibility with Expo 58. It signalled the start of a new era of consumerism. The triumphant technicity at the service of people assimilated progress with the acquisition of sophisticated electrical equipment. This industrial, technical approach to objects was a critical stage in the history of Belgian design, in terms of the future development of professional lighting as we now know it.

BELGIAN DESIGNERS AND LIGHTING

Alongside this industrial, professional approach to lighting, numerous freelance Belgian designers such as Nathalie Dewez, Sylvain Willenz, Luc Ramael, Frederik Delbart and Quentin de Coster have now adopted specific lighting techniques to create original, innovative lighting that incorporates certain aspects of their personality. The use of an ever-wider range of materials is making it possible to broaden the field of creative offerings. Atypical materials have personalised such designs as the *Casting Concrete* light by Vincent Van Duysen for Flos, the *Captain Cork* light by Miguel Arruda for Dark and the basalt (volcanic rock) *Drill* by the Studio LeviSarha.

Several years ago, lighting took a decisive turn in its development. In 2011, environmental regulations banned the incandescent lightbulb, which had been used for more than a century, in favour of electronic lighting. **LEDs (electroluminescent diodes) are at the heart of new technologies and are opening up numerous technical and formal possibilities** that are being explored by such designers as Frederik Delbart for his *Sibling* light at Per Use and Sylvain Willenz for his *U-series* at Arpel. Henriette Michaux, the lighting creator and ULG professor underlines the quantum shift caused by the arrival of LEDs in the formal repertoire of lighting equipment. In her view, technological advances are what have really guided the shape of lighting in the 20th and 21st centuries.

LEDs have effectively brought about a certain typology in lighting. The creation of flat surfaces for light sources has made way for new forms and possibilities.

One response among contemporary designers to new technologies has been an artistic, playful approach to lighting. Light fittings are becoming poetic, charming and iconic objects. The *Torch* light by Sylvain Willenz for Established & Sons and a number of Nathalie Dewez's creations such as *Still*, *Balance* and *Eclipse* spring to mind. The Brussels designer combines poetry with technology, as light also has the capacity to introduce an emotional element into a rational, architected context.

"At the present time, it is quite difficult to choose a light source when creating lighting. As a designer, we have to design lighting which will still be useable in 10 years' time and far beyond... But there is no real stability in the light source market. This sector is moving very quickly. To design functional, appropriate lighting, we are obliged to take this technology into account."

AND IN THE FUTURE...?

As a companion to our activities and thoughts, the intermediary between the environment and individuals, how is artificial lighting going to evolve over the coming decades? For Bart Maeyens, CEO of Modular Lighting Instruments, future lighting will be connected. *The LED is not an evolution or an innovation, but more of a revolution in the realm of artificial lighting. In the coming years, conventional light sources are going to disappear; there will only be LEDs. We are now turning our attention to connectivity. Integrated, connected systems oriented towards people and their needs will become increasingly important. Which formal language will designers adopt to combine these new technologies with people's effective lighting requirements, whilst remaining respectful of the environment?*

From *Lighting design* to *light design*? If the creation of lighting equipment was entirely achieved during the 20th century, is the design of light sources going to be the next challenge facing manufacturers?

BIOGRAPHY OF BENJAMIN STOZ, CURATOR OF THE EXHIBITION

In 2003, Benjamin Stoz graduated in interior design at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Brussels. His interest for the object and its placement in a space goes back to those early years in his training. A couple of years on, his thesis entitled Commercial design as sales argument was published by Edipro. His endeavours primarily turned towards commercial design and exhibition scenography.

With a European fund from EURODYSEE, he travelled to Valencia and Madrid in 2006, where, over a period of six years, he worked as interior designer for a firm of architects specialising in retail design. With this experience, he developed a different vision on interior design. Sensibility, technical grasp, dynamism and flexibility became his trademarks.

He returned to Belgium in 2012 to set up his own firm of interior design, specialising in exhibition scenography and interior decoration. Since then, he often participates in activities within the education system, for example judging at 'Ecole de Design de Nantes', the Royal Academies of Fine Arts in Brussels and Arlon, 'L'Ecole supérieure Art2 de Mons',... His passion for the history of design and architecture regularly involves him as curator. These related activities enable him to see his profession from a new angle, feeding his creative curiosity.

As curator

2017 :

- *From Belgium with light*, CID Grand-Hornu, Mons.
- *Curiosity, 23ste salon of Walloon art professions*. Abbatial palace of Saint-Hubert, in association with 'Entente interprovinciale des Métiers d'art de Wallonie'.
- *Archi-Hub, Architecture and urbanism in Saint-Hubert*. Exterior exhibition root on architecture and urbanism in Saint-Hubert. In association with 'Maison de l'Urbanisme Famenne Ardenne [MUFA]'.

2016 :

- *The little craft laboratory*, SDAC Province of Luxembourg, Saint-Hubert.
- *Concours Bois HLL*, organisation of a competition for architecture in association with DG04 and 'Ressources Naturelles et Développement'.

2014 :

- *Is the province of Luxembourg design?*, Abbatial palace of Saint-Hubert. Circle for reflection on design in a rural setting and contemporary creation in Belgian Luxembourg.

Publication

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Balance

Nathalie Dewez
ND Lighting
© photo Stijn Bollaert



Equilibre F33

Luc Ramael
© photo Prandina



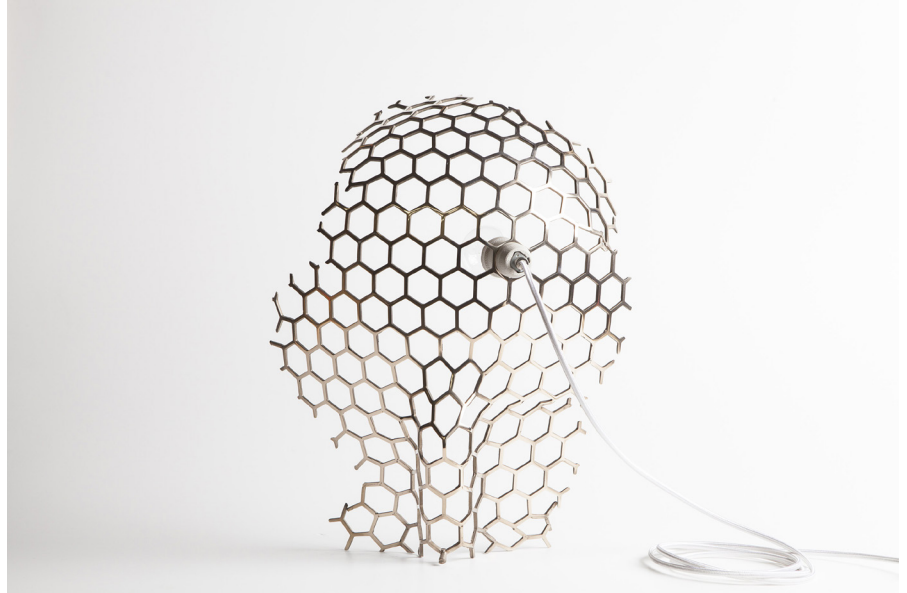
Drill

Levi Sarha
© photo LeviSarha



Veiled Lady

Damien Gernay
© photo Tine Claerhout



DESIGNERS

- 3H Draft
- Arruda Miguel
- Bart Lens
- Basten Leijh Design
- Bataille Calire - Ibens Paul
- Baugniet Marcel
- Berteau Alain
- Big Game
- Breucker Pascal
- Coddens Pierre
- Cornelissen Serge & Robert
- D'Or Jean-François
- De Bruyne Pieter
- De Ceulaer Maarten
- De Coster Quentin
- De Nyn Michel
- De Pelsmacker Hans
- de Witte Alex
- Delbart Frederik
- Deneufbourg Benoit
- Destino Nicolas
- Dethier Charles
- Dewez Nathalie
- Duffeleer Anthony
- Edmonds-Alt JP
- Gardin Emmanuel
- Gernay Damien
- Gevers Christophe
- Gilles Alain
- Gillis Paul
- Gobert Marie
- Gooris Frederic
- Jan Melis & Ben Oostrum
- Kerkhofs Bram
- Lallemand Pierre
- LeviSarha
- Lust Xavier
- Meert Hugo
- Michaux Henriette
- Michel De Nyn
- Modular Lighting Instruments
- Monnens Alain
- Muller - Van Severen
- Nuuv
- Ramael Luc
- Serrurier-Bovy Gustave
- Slavov Vladimir
- Tortel Michel
- Van der Meeren Willy
- Van Duysen Vincent
- Van Lierde Jan
- Van Severen Maarten
- Velnet Danny
- Veranneman Emiel
- Verly Laurent
- Versuyft Hans
- Vincent Luc
- Wabbes Jules
- Willenz Sylvain
- Wolfers Marcel
- Wortmann Constantin

PARTNERS



DONORS

- Alain Gilles
- Alessi
- Benoit Deneufbourg
- Dark
- Eden Desig
- Emmanuel Gardin
- Flos
- Per Use
- Studio Hugo Meert
- TAL
- Toss B édition
- [Trizo]²¹

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**CID - CENTRE FOR INNOVATION AND DESIGN
AT GRAND-HORNU**

Site du Grand-Hornu
Rue Sainte-Louise 82
B-7301 Hornu

T: +32 (0) 65 65 21 21
F: +32 (0) 65 61 38 97
info.cid@grand-hornu.be

www.cid-grand-hornu.be
www.grand-hornu.eu
www.facebook.com/cidgrandhornu

PRESIDENT

Fabienne Capot

DIRECTOR

Marie Pok

COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT

Gaëtan Delehouzée
+32 (0) 65 61 38 87
gaetan.delehouzee@grand-hornu.be

PRESSE CONTACT

Hélène van den Wildenberg
Caracas Public Relations
+32 (0) 4 349 14 41
+32 (0) 495 22 07 92
info@caracascom.com

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and 1st January.

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 - Discount: €2 or €5
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 - Free entry on the first sunday of the month
 - Free guided tour from Tuesday to Friday at 15.30,
Saturday at 11.00 and 15.30, Sunday at 15.00 and
16.30
 - Audio-guides for the historic site: €2
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-

BOOKING NUMBER

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+32 (0) 65 61 38 81
reservations@grand-hornu.be

THE BRASSERIE OF THE GRAND-HORNU

+32 (0) 65 61 38 76 - brasserie@grand-hornu.be

