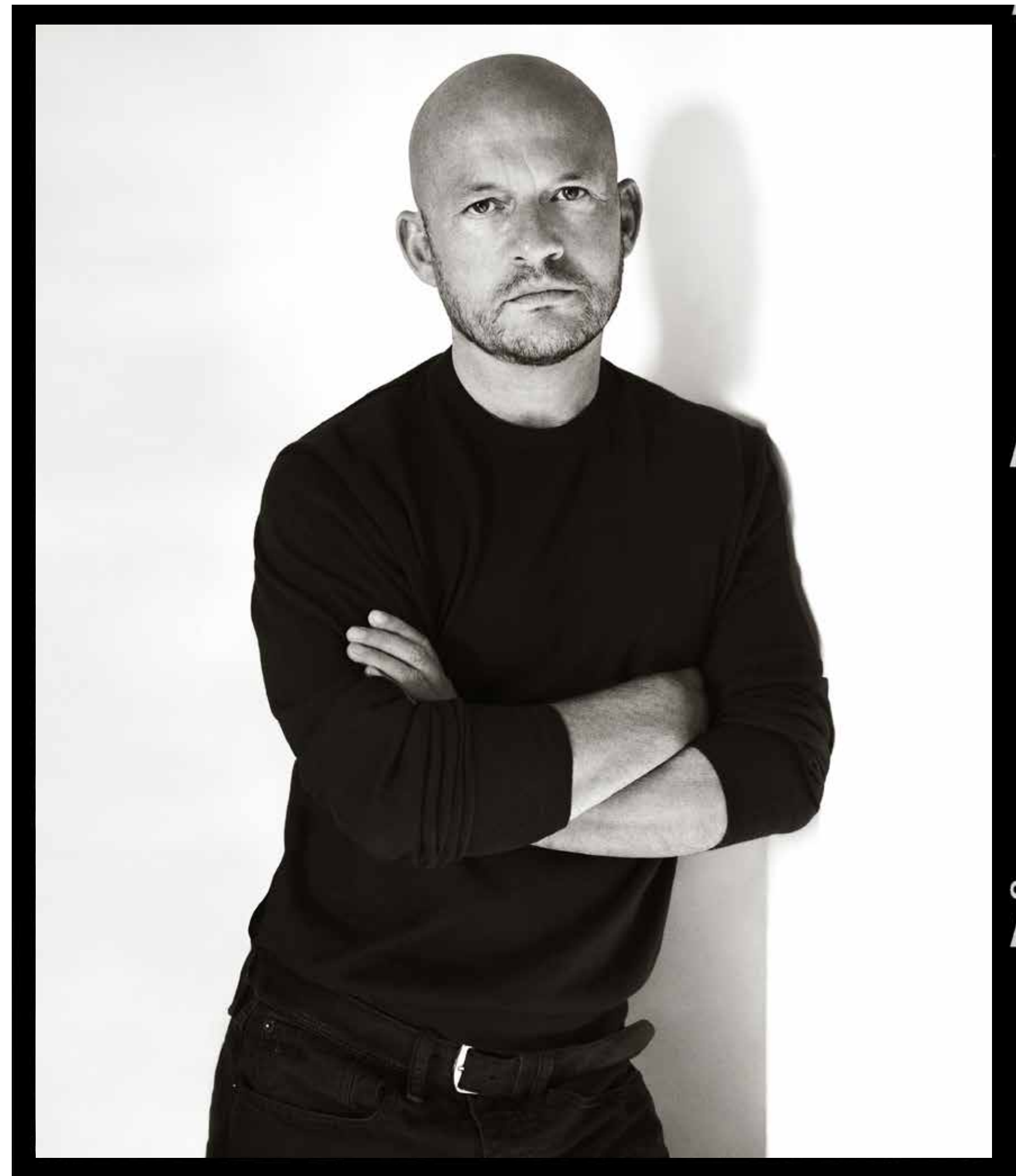




THE PEACE MAKER

Don't be fooled by the hard-man exterior; Vincent Van Duysen is Belgium's conjuror of calm. Sober yet spirited interiors. Serene homes and light-filled offices. Monumental tables. These are just some of the rigorous yet peaceful forms that this discreet architect and interior designer creates from his base in one of Europe's most discreet cities.

BY MAX CROSBIE-JONES / WITH THANKS TO B&B ITALIA





Vincent and his two dachshunds at his Antwerp "sanctuary."

Despite being home to an inordinate amount of cutting-edge talent, including fashion mavericks such as Dries Van Noten and Raf Simons, Antwerp likes to keep a low profile. And the same is true of Vincent Van Duysen, one of this Medieval port city's most talented residents. Born in 1962 in the Belgium town of Lokeren, this architect left for Milan in his early twenties, during "the peak of post-modernism," but he came back, decamped to Antwerp and never left. "I was homesick," he says of that time. "And I've always been an individualist."

For Vincent, now 53, there was something too rat-racey about Milan. It wasn't for him; Antwerp, with its more insular atmosphere conducive to the solitary and sustained pursuit of one's craft, was. "I've always been a little bit off to the side, off track, doing my things in my own world," he says, "and I just felt much more at ease here in my own country where there was less pressure. In Antwerp we work mostly as individuals and are less competitive, so I prefer to isolate myself and work from here."

Like he and his adopted city, Vincent's constructions are also understated. Take his home in Antwerp's city centre.

Dating back to the 17th century, it had, when he bought it in 1999, a lot of potential – a handsome white neo-classical 19th century facade, a huge black door and a private garden – but the interiors were crying out for renovation and restructuring. And they were big. "In the beginning I thought this is too big. I'm going to lose myself in this house," he says. But after much intense work – one year of planning, two years of construction – he now calls it his sanctuary. "Each time when I've been travelling and come back home it's like entering a temple," he says. "All the stress falls off me and it's very contemplative. It's very calming." He's not wrong. Inside, natural light spills onto bone-coloured walls, wooden floors and the odd object or piece of furniture (old Iranian carpets, works of contemporary art, sofas by Axel Vervoordt, etc). Though he says it is more

"anonymous" than his other projects, it's unmistakably a Van Duysen space – tactile, alluring and balanced, its elements all complement and enjoy a natural conversation with one another. It hums with a diffuse sort of serenity – and demonstrates, like all his projects, that, as Chris Meplon puts it, "a room or building can still appeal to the senses without slanting walls or flowers."



The unschooled might be tempted to call Vincent a minimalist, but there are those who think purist better describes his approach. Alberto Campo Baeza, a Spanish architect who numbers among his champions (and there are many of them), sees Vincent's work as being not part of the often cold and bloodless less-is-more tradition but the deeper, more-with-less tradition. He likens it to poetry – the memorable sort. "Good poetry, true poetry, is far from 'literary minimalism'; it is the fascinating ability to choose just a few words that can take us to a place of sublime beauty, deeply moving our hearts and minds – like Shakespeare or St John

of the Cross," Alberto writes. "More with less' architecture works in the same way. No more and no less, just enough; Van Duysen is no more and no less than a poet of contemporary architecture, and a good one."

Though his eagerness to get across his point means that his sentences sometimes trail off or trip over one another, Vincent is also a good conversationalist. When I meet him in Milan, he talks openly and lucidly of his outlook and approach. That shaved head gives him an air of don't-mess-with-me gruffness, but a warmth radiates from behind those piercing eyes. And when, at one point, I ask what his two most precious objects are, he looks at me as if I'm mad, smiles and says: "My two dachshunds." It is a tongue-in-cheek answer to a serious question, but a revealing one, as it suggests that he believes no

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object is precious enough to deserve putting on a pedestal. This sentiment is consistent with his portfolio. Whether it’s his home or a private residence, objects in Vincent’s interiors are few and far between, appearing less important than his use of texture, light and natural materials. They are quiet, subtle enhancers of the atmosphere rather than showpieces that dominate it. As Ilse Crawford writes in *Vincent Van Duysen – Complete Works*, “For Van Dyusen, there is no need to clamour for attention with virtuoso shapes. Common to all of his designs is an aversion to ostentation; he has no interest in short-term visual effect.”

Vincent’s rejection of showy things seems a little strange given that he once worked for Ettore Sottsass and Aldo Cibic, two of the founders of influential 1980s design collective Memphis Group. In the eighties, these Milanese pioneers of post-modernism were known for turning out colourful and asymmetrical furniture, fabrics, ceramics, glass and metal objects – something Vincent resolutely *isn’t* known for. Still, he professes to admire their work. “What I liked about them is the playfulness of working around primary forms that come from tribal art or cultures like India,” he says. “Obviously at that time it was all about patterns and flashy colours but at the core of their work was a kind of tradition and pureness.”

If not in Milan, then, where and when did his pared-down aesthetic come about? On returning to Antwerp in 1988 he worked for four years alongside the late Jean de Meulder, a classically-trained Belgium interior designer who strived to achieve “understated elegance and warmth” and avoided “bling bling.” This seems to have been the more formative experience. When he joined de Meulder he still felt he wasn’t ready to design a good interior or build his first house, he says, but doing so gave him the education he needed, not least a more emotional connection to his trade. “I wanted to know

more about the art of living,” he says. “I wanted to know how people live in their houses, what their needs are, and what they want from an architect.”

You know the piece of entertainment architecture that draws crowds? Most cities have one, maybe two: a contorted explosion of metal and glass, clamouring for attention and yearning for fame – one that appears to have forgotten its original purpose and beckons you to pull your camera out rather than walk inside. Well, that isn’t Vincent’s. His is the seemingly more anonymous building beside it, the silently sophisticated one that reveals itself slowly and only through direct interaction – exploration and experience.

Given his background in interior design, it’s not surprising that his buildings start from the inside and work their way out. They are silent, not loud. They are humanist, not grandiose or visionary. Vincent is not interested in the next big thing, visual flourishes, or imposing his own ego or rules regardless of context or user, as some architects are. Channeling

light, shadow, objects and materials, his sensuous compositions – for that is what they are – are resolutely personal. “I’m an atypical architect, not a mathematical, thinking architect,” he admits. “I’m intuitive. I work with people and for people.”

Tying all his work together is what he called in an interview with Julianne Moore (yes – the Oscar winning film star: she’s a big fan and a good friend), a “red thread.” “My work is very honest,” he says when I ask him to describe that red thread. “It’s very accessible and it’s definitely very human. It’s related to people and most of my work is kind of timeless. I also work a lot with natural materials, and add some referential touches that deal with memory or history – not just personal memory but also public.”



The staircase at Vincent’s home.



The living room and hallway at Vincent’s Antwerp home.



BS Residence in the Belgium province of West Flanders.

Photos by Juan Rodriguez.



The texture and tactility of materials are also “super important,” as they add “an extra dimension” to his projects. “My work at its pure essence is warm, it has a lot to do with tactility,” he says. “I’m always fascinated by how some materials can be treated and how beautiful it is when you bring them together in very unexpected ways to reinforce the idea and concept behind my projects.” The end goal, he says, is focussed, balanced, introverted spaces in which everything is beautifully lit but not over-lit. “It’s about discovering and being constantly triggered by what you see,” he adds. “I’m trying to create emotion and soul – not only in my objects but also in my architectural work.”

It’s an end goal that has led to many beguiling outcomes: not just renovated houses and new buildings but also products such as his new Oskar table for B&B Italia (a monumental top of cathedral glass, oak or natural stone atop a steel frame and solid or lacquered timber legs). It has also garnered Vincent lots of acclaim. Ann Demeulemeester and Patrick Robyn: “Vincent’s work is human; it possesses many qualities that we value in people. It is calm yet determined. It is reliable yet surprising. It is sober yet spirited.” Spanish

super-designer Patricia Urquiola: “I love Vincent’s work. It leaves one off-centred. It’s unusual and has a sense of composition – far from coldness, excess, fashions, trends, and with a sense of tradition applied to modernity that I have only found in Japan; His qualities as an individual permeate his design and live in his architecture.”

The acclaim is not only hailing from within the industry. “He’s my absolute favourite designer,” gushed Julianne Moore, when they met each other for an interview in her New York kitchen. “He’s been tremendously inspirational to me. I literally steal from him!” This is not mere hot air from a home-decor dabbler; it turns out Moore knows her stuff. “I feel like you put the Belgium aesthetic through a modernist sieve,” she said during their exchange. This is

a razor-sharp observation, given that Vincent’s frame of reference ranges from Le Corbusier to Hans van der Laan, the Benedictine monk behind Belgium’s Roosenberg Abbey, a modernist monastery that Vincent has cited as being hugely influential.

More importantly than all of this, the clients are lining up. His eponymous firm, which employs around 15 people, is currently working on about 20 projects, from residences in Paris, London, Beirut and New York to a 10,000 square metre

office block in Riyadh and the design concept for Alexander Wang’s flagship London store. He’s especially excited about his first hotel, especially because it’s in Antwerp. “It’s in an old convent in the same area as one of Belgium’s most important restaurants, The Jane. It used to be a military hospital where nuns lived in a different cloister of the chapel, and we’re working on that part. I’m very, very happy about it because I’ve been approached many times by international hoteliers from the states and it always scared me a little bit...I think by doing it in my own city, my own culture, I can really respect more what it’s been touched by and what it’s connected to. And there’s already so much going on in

that cloister that belongs to my world. It’s the perfect match.”

Does he ever feel the pressure to perform or deliver the signature Van Duysen look? In a word, no. “I know myself and I know how to protect myself,” he says. He avoids the media, except when it’s to share his vision with people who admire his work. And, of course, meek old Antwerp keeps him grounded. “We’re individualists here and we’re all different,” he says. “You can see it in the fashion people, the artists, painters, dancers, actors, architects...there is an enormous degree of talent and we’re all workers. We are really focussed and we love what we’re doing and we like to share it with people. But we’re all very humble. We’re very discreet and I think that makes us, Belgium, a little bit different.” ✱



Oskar table for B&B Italia.



Vincent's qualities as an individual permeate his design and live in his architecture.

