

Heritage in Motion

The secrets to Delvaux’s reign as the world’s oldest fine leather goods house? Its legacy as a pioneer, its trailblazing innovations, its craftsmanship, and a dash of Belgian wit.

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There are many things that we take for granted in today’s fast-paced world. Take the modern handbag. It may not be an invention that immediately comes to mind, but fellow stylemakers know: it’s a necessity that deserves way more applause. The year was 1908. For the first time, the daily life of women began to go beyond the confines of the humble abode. While prior decades were defined by intricately embroidered minaudière, ladies were now on the lookout for a more practical and still desirable solution to suit their newfound freedom of movement. Enter Delvaux’s *le Princesse*, the world’s first patented leather handbag. The original design – marked by a mod architectural shape, ornamental flap, top-handle, and kiss-lock closure – would not only facilitate female emancipation but be a forebear to what many would consider their most prized possession today. This moment of trailblazing innovation isn’t a one-off for the Belgian brand. Founded in 1829 by Charles Delvaux, it is also the world’s oldest fine leather goods house, preceding even the Kingdom of Belgium by a year. While Delvaux, the architect of leather, is best known for the *Brillant*, the *Tempête*, and the

Pin, which embody the *arts decoratifs* principle of “the beautiful in the useful”, trunks were its first hit. Catering to travellers who relied on horse-drawn carriages then trains, some of the brand’s founding designs featured functional wax and curved iron edges to ensure one’s belongings could withstand long journeys come rain or shine. In 1883, Delvaux was appointed the official purveyor of the Royal Court of Belgium. Fast forward half a century, the brand subverted the industry of fine leather goods again by introducing *seasonal creations*. Mirroring fashion couturiers, new designs were released in cohesive collections separated by spring-summer and fall-winter seasons. Pair this momentous history with uninterrupted activity since its inception, Delvaux also boasts one of the richest archives in the industry – more than 3,000 of its unique designs

are chronicled as sketches in the *Livre d’Or*, or more colloquially referred to as the *Golden Book*. To this day, this catalogue, with the help of an in-house historian, is updated and used as a reference to ensure that Delvaux’s discreet yet timeless aesthetic continues to evolve. Consider the emblematic *Pin* bag. First introduced in 1972, the simple and expressive design features clear lines that give it a sense of



movement. The D-shaped front pocket and perforated base took inspiration from the sack that a donkey feeds from. More than 50 years later, Delvaux reinterpreted this icon with the *Pin Swing* that re-imagines the original with an exaggerated curved silhouette and a multi-functional double strap. This blend of the past and future into one, or what the fine leather goods house terms as “heritage always in motion”, is further echoed by its designs that are a whimsical nod to Belgian culture. Since the 1980s, famed Belgian fashion designers from Martin Margiela to Veronique Branquinho, have been invited to put their unique spin on Delvaux’s archival creations. Last year, the brand also celebrated the 125th anniversary of another local legend: surrealist artist René Magritte. Paying tribute to his iconic paintings, Delvaux dropped a series of witty special edition *The Magritte* capsule collections such as *L’Humor*, that reimagines *The Treachery of Images* on the *Brillant* and the *Pin* bags, and *La Pomme*, that depicts Magritte’s emblematic green apple motif. L’Arsenal, Delvaux’s headquarters, is another testament to the fine leather goods house’s onus on craftsmanship, innovation, and heritage. Located in a reclaimed military barrack, one has to walk past a pristine showroom and carefully stored archival creations to reach the place where all the magic happens: the atelier. Backdropped by industrial steel beams, exposed brick walls, and window-filled ceilings that allow natural light to fill the space,

skilled artisans handcraft icons like the *Brillant* as well as special orders. The process starts with specialists who carefully inspect and cut leather, followed by detailed stitching and finishing. Restorations also take place here, further demonstrating Delvaux’s belief that its offerings are both sustainable in its making and usage. Take the elevator upstairs for another surprise. Lo and behold, the L’Arsenal also hosts an in-house museum that is a detailed walk-through of Delvaux’s rich history. Apart from getting a close-up look at the brand’s cherished *Livre d’Or*, ultra-rare designs are showcased such as the original *Brillant* introduced in 1958 and *Mon Grand Bonheur* that was created to celebrate the marriage of Belgian King Albert II and Queen Paola Ruffo di Calabria in 1959. One doesn’t have to enter the L’Arsenal to experience the Delvaux universe



first hand. Each of its physical stores, about 60 around the world, is an immersion all in itself. Consider Le 27, its flagship location on Boulevard de Waterloo in Brussels. Once a private home, the reclaimed two-storey space is marked by a spiralling staircase, iron fixtures, and a carefully thought out juxtaposition of old and new. Delvaux’s latest collections contrast a wall of minaudière, whereas kitschy post-neo-Flemish portraits by emerging Argentine artist Romina Ressia oppose 17th century Flemish-inspired furniture re-interpreted with a light touch. Odes to hometown heroes further reflect in the choices of other 20th century furniture, notably, a Renaat Braem desk, a fine specimen of marquetry work with wood in light and dark shades. And if history is any indication of what’s to come, another industry-shifting innovation is on the horizon. Enter *Helios*, a groundbreaking colour-changing take on the *Pin* and the dainty top-handle the *Caprice*. Debuting at its

spring-summer 2025 presentation in Paris, the four limited edition offerings are created in partnership with E Ink. Displaying the fruits of two years of research and development, coded *paper* is masterfully interwoven with Delvaux’s supple leathers. The never-before-seen technology is seamlessly triggered by the simple click of a well-concealed button located in the bag’s interior. While we will have to wait until 2025 to see *Helios* in real time, one thing is for certain: Delvaux’s legacy of innovation, grounded in humility, lives on. www.delvaux.com

