



WELL-TAILORED

Precision design by Vincent Van Duysen

Vincent Van Duysen's design language is highly aesthetic and somehow manages to thwart fashions and trends. Focusing on each individual project, the architect/designer inhabits the particular spatial context, searching for the essence before embarking on a solution. In his toolbox are pure and tactile materials that evoke sensuality while at the same time defining a clear and timeless design. Indeed, the meticulous nature of his work verges on the spiritual. DAMN° chatted with Van Duysen on the occasion of the Salone, where he designed the Molteni&C stand and presented several new products for Flos and Poliform, as well as for Molteni&C and Dada.

TEXT Anna Sansom

As a young architect working in Milan in the late 1980s, Vincent Van Duysen admired the Molteni&C stands at the city's world-famous furniture fair. Fast-forward three decades and Van Duysen has been appointed creative director of Molteni&C and Dada, hoping to reinvigorate the venerable Italian brand. "I want to bring Molteni back on track to the image that it has had since I was living in Milan – I remember seeing beautiful booths with pieces by Aldo Rossi, Luca Meda, and Carlo Scarpa", he enthuses. "Molteni has always been a big example of Italian elegance, design, and flair, with great talent and great architects. After Luca Meda [former chief designer and art director] died in 1998, you could feel that Molteni deviated from the path, although it was doing well, and that it needed somebody to support it and infuse a new direction."

In 1986-1987, Van Duysen was assisting Aldo Cibic at Cinzia Ruggeri following his architectural studies at Sint-Lucas Ghent in Belgium. "Going to Italy at the peak of post-modernism was all about geometric forms and an explosion of colour and materials", says the Belgian architect/designer. "What I learnt from people like Ettore Sottsass and Aldo Cibic is how they drew inspiration from cultures like India and infused those elements with amazing colours, making an abstraction out of them. After two years, I wanted to go back to the essence of forms and translate that into my architectural work in Antwerp." Since the inception of his office in 1990, Van Duysen's name has become synonymous with refined modernism – think clean, crisp lines – and the marrying of a rigorous attention to detail with a luxurious use of materials. His aesthetic, applied to architecture, interior design, and products, is about "fine-tuning archetypes", denoting a purity of vision in his projects.

Vincent Van Duysen
Photo: Jan Verlinde



BE + IT

Van Duysen's collaboration with Molteni harks back to 2008, when he designed a residential tower on the waterfront in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, bringing in Unifor, part of the Molteni group, to work on the interiors. Van Duysen and Carlo Molteni – president and managing director of the Molteni Group – hit it off. “Apparently Molteni has always liked collaborating with architects because of how they approach the design of a product with a broader perspective than designers. By not starting with the details but with the spatial context, knowing that these products have to live in people’s residences and need to be understated and refined, with the technology being discreet but not overruling.” The first ‘try out’ was at imm cologne in January. Van Duysen designed Molteni’s stand, imbuing it with ideas from his own home and from an Italian palazzo. “The spaces and the living room were oriented around a palazzo, a secret garden, in warm, texturised materials. So this could be Molteni’s new home, in the eyes of Vincent”, he explains. “This was the first step of a

symbiosis between me, a non-Italian architect, and one of Italy’s most historic companies.” Indeed, Van Duysen recognises a historical connection between the Belgians and the Italians, citing how Flemish painters travelled to Rome during the Renaissance to deepen their knowledge of painting.

Gliss Master for Molteni&C

Quinten sideboard/cabinet for Molteni&C

For the Salone del Mobile, Van Duysen not only designed the stands for Molteni&C and Dada but unveiled several new products, including the Paul sofa collection, the Jan coffee table, and the Quinten sideboard/cabinet collection for Molteni, and the VVD collection for Dada. The Paul sofa reinterpreted the double stitching of Van Duysen’s Ribbon bed (2015). “It was about working on beauty, functionality, and dimensions, for a deep sofa that is a protagonist in the space”, says Van Duysen of the Paul. “It has oversized cushions sewn into the sofa that people can position randomly according to how they want to use them.” The Jan coffee table was designed to be an architectural table system, with metal legs that can be placed in different compositions, while the Quinten sideboard “is like domestic architecture”. As he says, “It’s composed of metal shelving that contains wooden boxes where you can showcase beautiful objects like vases or spirits.”



REVEALING

This architectural approach follows on from Van Duysen’s recent Gliss Master wardrobe proposal for Molteni. “The dressing room is increasingly becoming a prominent place in people’s houses”, believes Van Duysen. “The challenge was to find a way to divide each of the cupboards in a functional yet appealing manner, re-evaluating how people want to conserve their jewellery and shoes. So I made pull-out trays in leather, creating a versatile design as well as a kind ritual for opening the drawers. Wardrobe doors disappear into the walls or are covered in leather, to highlight the preciousness of the dressing room nowadays.”

Paul sofa for Molteni&C

Jan table for Molteni&C

Ribbon bed for Molteni&C



During Milan Design Week, Van Duysen also presented two lighting collections for Flos, the leading Italian manufacturer of innovative lighting solutions, marking the debut of a new collaboration. The pieces were previewed in Flos's showroom on Corso Monforte in the glamorous heart of Milan. Describing how this collaboration came about, Van Duysen recounts, "Piero Gandini was looking at my work and was interested in having me design some architectural lighting for him." What ensued is Infra-Structure for the Flos architectural collection, a grid-like "network of light" for the walls or ceiling. "We have this incredible heritage of architectural lighting in Belgium, like Modular and Delta, so I thought, 'Let's reverse that 360 degrees and create a system that's totally apparent, where everything's visible, based on Bauhaus lighting'", he says of Infra-Structure. "It's not about hiding the tubes but showing them in a modular system that can become fragile and poetic." The other, Casting, is an outdoor collection made for Lukas Lighting, the American brand that Flos acquired in December. Casting is a group of LED bollard lights in aluminium and textured glass, comprised of angular forms with slightly



Casting Semicircular
Illustration by Nigel Peake

Casting, a group of LED bollard lights for outdoors, available in T- and C-shaped models in white, aluminium, anthracite, black, and rust red

Casting Semicircular, available in different rough materials: oxidised bronze, concrete, cast iron, and coated aluminium



curved edges. It consists of T- and C-shaped bollards that refer to the language of minimal art and that, thanks to their clean, sober lines, can fit into all kinds of environments. The half-rounded model refers to modernist architecture. It expresses a radical, almost brutalist, archetypal language and is enhanced with strong, heavy materials like concrete and solid bronze.

MULTIFARIOUSNESS

Van Duysen's other launches include the Marlon chair for Poliform, a dining table for Paola Lenti's Portofino collection, a tap collections for Fantini Rubinetti, and a wooden/Plexiglas bowl for When Objects Work, extending its pottery collection.



Infra-Structure, a tubular lighting system with an industrial aesthetic / The collection is composed of a 24V track using the exclusive Flos magnetic technology for power distribution.

Pottery bowl for When Objects Work



Portofino table for Paola Lenti
Top with tiles of natural lava stone, base in black locust heartwood with an acrylic finish

Marlon chair for Poliform
Structure in flexible moulded polyurethane, inserts in multi-density flexible moulded polyurethane, pre-covering in polyester padding, stretched final cover in fabric and leather, wooden base of Spessart oak and black elm



“Poliform asked me to design a grand, important chair, so we interpreted the name of Marlon Brando”, he informs. “I wanted to highlight the craftsmanship and create a comfortable chair that sits on a scissor-form structure in wood, with beautiful, vintage-inspired detailing on the teeth.” By contrast, the Portofino dining table embraces the use of stone. “Here, I wanted to use marquetry in lava stone but with an original, raw appearance”, he notes. Van Duysen – who willingly accepts a wide array of commissions, from skyscrapers through to taps – has designed two lines: Icona Classic and Icona Deco for Fantini Rubineti, in materials ranging from sophisticated silver nickel to industrial gun metal.

With an architectural realm extending to stores, offices, and residential buildings, Van Duysen is designing the forthcoming extension of Molteni&C’s flagship store in Tokyo (following stores he designed for Alexander Wang in London and Aesop in Hamburg). Also in the pipeline are private residences in Antwerp, Paris, and Beirut, plus projects in New York state and in Los Angeles, as well as two buildings in Antwerp: service flats for the elderly and – excitingly – his first hotel, which will have 45 rooms.

“Each of my projects is tailor-made; I never repeat myself”, insists Van Duysen, in reply to how he approaches so many different briefs. “I dive into my client’s life to understand who they are and what they want, in order to design something apart from spectacular trends. For me, it’s all about chemistry [with the client], detailing, and precision.” •

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