

# CONTENTS

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| <b>PREFACE</b>   | <b>7</b>   |
| BY JEAN PAUL GAULTIER  |            |
| <b>INTRODUCTION</b>  | <b>9</b>   |
| BY WALTER VAN BEIRENDONCK  |            |
| <b>'HAPPY BIRTHDAY, DEAR ACADEMIE!'</b>  | <b>11</b>  |
| BY KAAAT DEBO  |            |
| <b>BETWEEN AVANT-GARDE &amp; TRADITION</b>                                     | <b>13</b>  |
| BY SARAH HEYNSSENS   |            |
| <b>A SENSE OF PLACE</b>  | <b>41</b>  |
| BY SUZY MENKES   |            |
| <b>ANTWERP ICONS</b>   | <b>49</b>  |
| <b>THE WONDER YEARS OF THE ANTWERP 6+1</b>                                     | <b>65</b>  |
| BY KAREN VAN GODTSENHOVEN  |            |
| <b>THE ROLE OF DRAWING IN FASHION</b>  | <b>125</b> |
| BY EMMANUELLE DIRIX  |            |
| <b>THE FASHION DESIGNER AS ARTIST:<br/>REFLECTIONS ON 50 YEARS OF PEDAGOGY</b> | <b>171</b> |
| BY TODD NICEWONGER   |            |
| <b>FASHION BUT NOT FASHION</b>   | <b>215</b> |
| BY PETER DE POTTER   |            |
| <b>SHOWTIME!</b>   | <b>245</b> |
| BY HETTIE JUDAH  |            |



## BETLE AND TYROLEAN FASHION

[...] What the students showed this year had style and originality, and not only from the final year students! With few exceptions, like Dirk Van Saene's colourful clothes in Pomeranian fashion, the trend was simple and geometric.

[...] Nor was humour lacking, witness the Tyrolean-inspired series by Andries Van Noten.

[...] Outliers in the penultimate year were the collections of Danielle Sainderichin and Ann Demeulemeester, inspired respectively by Mongolia and Japan, and in the final year those of Walter Van Beirendonck and Martin Margiela, who went looking at the beetle world and constructivism respectively.

[...] But how ever wide the gates of creativity are opened, each series ended invariably with a white bride. Only among the insects was she dressed in inauspicious black...'

— I.V.V., *De Nieuwe Gazet*, Wednesday 25 June 1980

# INTRODUCTION

BY WALTER VAN BEIRENDONCK, FASHION DEPARTMENT HEAD, ROYAL ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS, ANTWERP

This was the only review that we graduates from the class of 1980 got from the Belgian newspaper, *De Nieuwe Gazet*. Now, more than 30 years later the whole world is watching our graduates' final catwalk.

In 1963, Mark Macken, then director of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp, made the brave decision to set up this Fashion Department alongside the other art disciplines.

In 1975, inspired by an article in *Avenue* magazine, I decided to try and become a student at the Fashion Department of the Antwerp Academy. It may have had something to do with my 7 ½-inch platform shoes, but whatever the reason, Mary Prijot, founder of the department and avid lover of Chanel, didn't find me suitable for the course and my application was turned down. I refused to give up: I enrolled in a preparatory year programme at the Academy, which was great, and after which I was admitted to the first year.

The world of fashion finally opened up to me. The school gave me a wonderful opportunity to draw and be creative, but it was the synergy between my fellow students that was the most exciting of all. I have wonderful memories of working first with Martin Margiela, then Dirk Van Saene, Dries Van Noten, Ann Demeulemeester, Dirk Bikkembergs ('de Lange' or 'the tall one' as we used to call him) and Marina Yee. We discovered and experienced things together, we soaked up knowledge like sponges, we had ambition and energy. The Academy years, and those that followed, became the basis of our careers.

In 1985, at the request of Marthe Van Leemput, I came back to the Academy, this time as a tutor. I worked with Linda Loppa, who had recently been appointed head of the department. I had never thought of becoming a lecturer and found it quite strange in the beginning — I was, after all, the same age as the students! But it turned out that I had enough imagination and empathy to inspire the students. I was able to guide them and push the boundaries of their creativity, which resulted in some wonderful and very individual collections as well as many brilliant careers.

In 2007, Linda Loppa asked me to become her successor as head of the Fashion Department. For more than 20 years I had been part of a team of dedicated teachers, and taking on this role felt very natural. It must be clear to you by now the important role the Fashion Department has played, and still plays, in my life. I have been with the Academy for almost 30 years, and I feel very blessed to have been part of such a creative, wonderful environment.

Fashion has changed, the world has changed, but at our school, we want for our students what we have always wanted: the chance to get a very personal, tailor-made education, suited to their individual needs. We offer an environment which assists, guides, pushes and appraises them in the most honest, direct and constructive way possible. As in most art schools, our budget is limited, yet we still reject commercial propositions — we want to remain fully independent. I have always strived to protect this unique, individual creative hub, where emotion and passion rule.

But it is not always easy to find the right balance. On the one hand, the students need exposure to the fashion world and industry. They show their work to the international world of fashion, which puts a lot of pressure on them, but it is important for their future careers. On the other hand, they need to be motivated to finish their all-important Masters year, even though headhunters and international fashion houses are ready to snap up the third year bachelors. It was totally different when my fellow students and I graduated in 1980 and 1981 — no one came to see us then.

I want to emphasize that everything that has happened to the school since the early Eighties is not only the result of what has happened in Belgian fashion since that time. Yes, there were students with amazing talent, but there was also an incredible team of teachers to guide them and channel that talent. Thank you for being my colleagues during those wonderful years!

Entrance to the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, early 1960s.



# BETWEEN AVANT-GARDE & TRADITION

BY SARAH HEYNSSENS

## FIFTY YEARS OF FASHION AT THE ROYAL ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS, ANTWERP<sup>1</sup>

Today, scores of fashion designers who have studied at the Antwerp Academy enjoy international fame. Names such as Martin Margiela, Ann Demeulemeester, Walter Van Beirendonck, Dries Van Noten, Veronique Branquinho, AF Vandevorst, Bernhard Willhelm, Peter Pilotto, Haider Ackermann and many others have helped make Belgian fashion great, while giving it an identity all its own. The fashion design department of the Antwerp Academy does not need to take second place to its illustrious alumni. In the course of its 50 years of existence, the department has undergone enormous evolution: the curriculum and teaching methodology have become thoroughly professionalized, the numbers of students have grown exponentially and, in parallel with the school's growing international reputation, have become more diversified. From a department that was originally looked down upon by the traditional art school disciplines, the Antwerp Fashion Department has developed into one of the best-known and most influential fashion schools in the world.

## BUILDING THE CURRICULUM UNDER MARY PRIJOT

Beginning in the 1950s, there was renewed interest in the applied arts and crafts at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp, inspired by the educational legacy of the Bauhaus movement. In addition to the traditional disciplines of painting, sculpture and printmaking, space was now being created for more 'functional' courses, such as monumental arts (including mural painting, glass, mosaics, tapestries, etc.), applied graphic design and printmaking, ceramics and jewellery design. Even during the

war years, evening classes in ornament and fashion drawing had also been offered at the Academy.<sup>2</sup> The course in fashion drawing involved little more than drawing from a mannequin in charcoal or watercolours.<sup>3</sup> Occasionally, in the Publicity and Typography course, the students also made fashion drawings and posters.<sup>4</sup>

A fully-fledged curriculum in fashion would have to wait until the 1963–1964 academic year. On March 2, 1962, by royal decree, the programme in 'Fashion and Ornamental Drawing' was established as part of the graphic arts curriculum.<sup>5</sup> The new department was the initiative of the Academy's then director, Mark Macken (1913–1977). The foundation of a Fashion Department was, however, not to everyone's taste. Many felt that fashion did not belong in a traditional art school. Macken was not to be dissuaded. He saw a space for a programme in fashion education that could engage in dialogue with the Academy's other disciplines and would guarantee a high-level arts training course that distinguished itself from what the existing technical dress-making schools had to offer. He believed that throughout history, fashion had had a major influence on the behaviour of people and on art itself. 'Well, seen historically, fashion is so closely bound to the art of its time that it is impossible to separate the two. [...] There is nothing that reflects the times as much as fashion. The danger of course lies in the risk that great art would become fashion, but that will not be prevented by fashion courses at an art school.'<sup>6</sup>

The new Fashion Department would be under the leadership of Mary Prijot (1917–1998). Prijot was herself an Antwerp Academy graduate and had already earned her laurels as a painter. In 1962, one of the professors at the Academy told Prijot about the establishment of the new department and suggested that she apply for the



Sint-Lucas Banquet, 1966, from left to right: director Mark Macken, Mary Prijot, Piet Serneels, Marthe Van Leemput and Frans Van Look (painter).

position. Prijot was given the job and immediately travelled to Paris and Cologne to prepare for her new teaching position.<sup>7</sup> In France, she spent three months attending classes at the *École Technique Des Arts Appliqués*, where in her own words, she learned the profession of fashion design from inside out and outside in. There, classes and design work were based on the history of costume and the history of art, with great emphasis on general cultural education. The course moreover included training in publicity, typography and *drapage*. There was strong emphasis on life drawing and the human body. After Paris, Prijot went on to Cologne, where she followed courses in theatre fashion and costume design at the *Kölner Werkschule*.<sup>8</sup> In addition to *patronage*, she learned to design historical costumes. Prijot moreover took private classes in *coupe* and *couture*. Armed with this somewhat limited arsenal of both an art training and now a more practical technical training, in the 1963–1964 academic year, Prijot began her course in 'fashion drawing'. Simultaneously the evening courses in fashion drawing continued until the entire educational curriculum was restructured in 1966.

During the early years, the Fashion Department consisted of little more than fashion drawing, while the search continued for a permanent form for the Fashion Department programme. On Prijot's incentive, the original curriculum would quickly be transformed into a complete fashion design curriculum. In the 1965–1966 academic year, the programme was renamed as 'Fashion and Theatre Costume'.<sup>9</sup> Prijot believed that Belgium offered good opportunities in the textile industry for burgeoning fashion designers.<sup>10</sup> From the perspective of her training in art, she wanted to shape designers who, if indeed inspired by Paris fashions, would nonetheless be able to present a vision and an image of fashion of their own. It was with this objective in mind that the curriculum was designed.

Until the 1970s, the emphasis continued to be on fashion drawing, and less on the technical execution of the designs themselves. Students drew models in costume, as well as beauty products, hats, hairdos,

accessories, fabrics and other style elements.<sup>11</sup> The purpose of the fashion drawing was to sharpen the students' sense of perception. With a thorough knowledge of their materials, they would be able to achieve better graphic visualization of 'material, form, colour and the dialogue between apparel and human movement'.<sup>12</sup> Prijot felt this phase was extremely important, and believed that it was here that the foundations would be laid for the development of an overall image for a collection of ones own.<sup>13</sup> Designers being groomed to work in the industry had to be able to make clear to others which fabrics and accessories they wanted to use. Students were given weekly drawing assignments in which they had to make contemporary derivatives from existing fashion objects. They were sometimes required to draw perfume bottles, or certain historical costumes. These classes were not intended simply to hone technical drawing skills, but also to heighten the students' creativity.

In time, the Fashion Department curriculum embraced more than just fashion drawing. Prijot explained that the idea was that the students themselves should create a model and then produce it: 'That entails more than just drawing a model. That model also has to be something that can be produced, which requires an elementary knowledge of cutting and sewing, good insight into the materials used and the possibilities, as well as production on an industrial scale.'<sup>14</sup> Because Prijot's own technical background was limited, she soon (1966–1967) hired the 35-year-old Marthe Van Leemput, one of her students, as an assistant for the actual production of the designs. When Van Leemput first came to study with Prijot, the two women quickly developed a close friendship. 'I was 35 and wanted to start drawing again. I remember that I arrived at the Academy and everyone thought I was the teacher, because I was older, of course. Anyway, I was immediately recruited for the atelier, for cutting, because I had some practical experience. I certainly had not planned on staying at the Academy, but things clicked between Mary and me, and I enjoyed the work, so that is the way it went. It was a strange

situation: I was still a student myself, giving lessons to other students. Back then, things like that were still possible.<sup>15</sup>

The first, and for a while the only sewing machine at the department was one found at a Salvation Army second hand store for a paltry hundred Belgian francs. The further evolution of the curriculum also happened rather intuitively. Marthe Van Leemput recalls that the curriculum was constantly being honed. 'Mary first thought it would be useful for students to make an historical costume out of paper, as a basis. We decided on half a costume, but that was ridiculous; they could just as well make a complete example. Then I went on holiday to Greece and came back convinced that they should do folklore in the second year. So that was how things expanded.'<sup>16</sup>

In this way, a blueprint fairly quickly evolved, one that today still forms the cornerstone of the Fashion Department curriculum. In the first year, students were assigned to make a skirt and a top, as well as a beach ensemble and an evening dress based on a predetermined theme. The beach ensembles and evening dresses were produced in unbleached cotton, recycled materials and linens.<sup>17</sup> In the second year, the students made a replica of a historical costume. Based on this historical piece, they then created a modern collection of five silhouettes. In the third year, this same exercise was repeated on the basis of traditional folklore costumes, followed by a collection of seven silhouettes and two or three children's pieces based on the folklore costumes (today they create eight silhouettes; the children's models are no longer used). The purpose of this assignment was to help students to analyze a culture and, in this way, be able more closely to understand and approach the mentality of a given people.<sup>118</sup> In the fourth and last year, students designed a complete, contemporary collection of twelve outfits. These basic assignments still form the core of the fashion curriculum today.

From 1966, practical studio classes were complemented by theory classes. These fit into the framework of the national restructuring of higher education in art. For the Antwerp Academy, it meant the stipulation of a complete day-to-day programme. The emphasis was still on practical studio subjects, as had been the case in the past, but from now on, a third of the classroom time would be devoted to general education subjects. For the Fashion Department, this meant an important focus on the history of (European) costume and apparel, taught in great detail from antiquity to the present day. Given her background as a painter, Prijot believed that sound knowledge of the history of costume was essential for a designer to succeed. Here again, drawing was the means of mastering that knowledge: in class, students drew a silhouette from the period under discussion, and in the process of drawing, they put together their own syllabus, one class at a time. In addition, the fashion students also selected from a varying range of theory and humanities

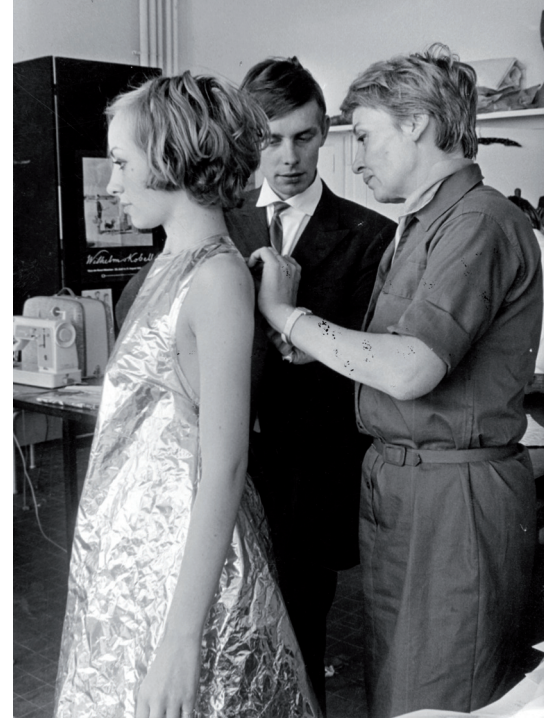


Life drawing in the fashion studio, Antwerp, 1953.

courses from the other departments of the Academy, including world literature, psychology, art history and so on.

In the early years, many of the students had first completed a three-year arts and humanities orientation programme, as well as an initial preparatory year together with students from the various other departments.<sup>19</sup> Only then did they choose to specialize in fashion design. In conjunction with the restructuring of higher education in general, the criteria for admission also became more stringent. They were brought into line with the admissions criteria for other recognized higher learning disciplines. Students now had to present proof of successful secondary school education as well as to pass an artistic entrance exam that included a realistic rendering of a still life.<sup>20</sup>

In 1966, for the first time, a final exam fashion show was organized in the Academy's refectory. Students either modelled their own pieces or had friends model them. Although the first shows were very amateurish, they made lasting impressions on those who came to see them. Prijot wanted to model the shows on the exhibitions of the Kölner Werkschule, where every four years, a fashion show was organized with participation from the various departments of the school.<sup>21</sup> This also chimed with the vision of Mark Macken, who was striving to achieve a far-reaching integration between the different disciplines of the Academy. Although the Fashion Department now had a prominent place within the Academy, for a long time, it remained something of a maverick.



Top left: The very first fashion show at the Winter Garden of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Antwerp, 1966.

Top right: Mary Prijot assisting Jean-Christophe Decarpenterie with his student design, ca. 1965–1966.

Centre left: Marthe Van Leemput and Mary Prijot during the first fashion show, 1966.

Centre right: A model showing a creation in the Antwerp Academy refectory, 1970s.

Below right: In 1978, third year students in fashion and theater costume design worked together. At the end-of-the-year fashion show, their work was presented together as a group, in the Academy's Long Room.







Top left: Mary Prijot with teachers Hieron Pessers and Marthe Van Leemput, 1975.



Top right: The fashion design studio, 1975;  
 Fashion and theatre costume design students with Mary Prijot and teachers  
 Marthe Van Leemput and Hieron Pessers, 1975;  
 Mary Prijot helps a student decorate the room for the Sint Lucas Banquet, 1966.



'I studied at the Fashion Department thanks to Hieron Pessers. He taught draping and fabric modelling at the time. I saw how people were working in fashion design, while I was still studying graphic illustration. I found it fascinating. He was a painting student, because he wanted to be a painter, but for four hours a week, he worked as a visiting lecturer in the Fashion Department. He had worked for Givenchy, and with Galitzine in Rome. He had taught in London, at a school with a completely different mentality. For example, the director there sought contact with the fashion houses and ensured that her students got apprenticeships after their graduation shows. Hieron frequently talked to Mary Prijot about it: 'Why not organize a high-level show and invite people from Yves Saint Laurent?' Hieron pushed to incorporate the new perspectives here. Inspired by his experience in London, he also told Prijot, "You cannot organize a fashion show on the refectory tables. The press has to be invited; there have to be professional models...." Together with the future Six, who were very ambitious, he instigated a turning point in the Fashion Department.'

— BOB VERHELST



DIRK VAN SAENE  
SPRING/SUMMER 2008  
TROMPE L'OEIL COTTON SKIRT

# ANTWERP ICONS

CONCEPT & STYLING – DIRK VAN SAENE | PHOTOGRAPHY – RONALD STOOPS | MAKE-UP – INGE GROGNARD | HAIR – ED MOELANDS | MODELS – LISA VERBERGHT & BENONI LOOS  
PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANCE – JEF JACOBS | PRODUCTION – DAVID FLAMÉE

In the autumn of 2013, the MoMu – Fashion Museum of Antwerp, in collaboration with Antwerp Open and Flanders Tourism, will present the extra muros project, Antwerp Icons. 12 iconic pieces by 12 designers, all Fashion Department alumni, will be photographed by Ronald Stoops, in collaboration with make-up artist Inge Grognaard and styled by Dirk Van Saene. The oversized fashion images will create an open-air exhibition in the streets of Antwerp.



WALTER VAN BEIRENDONCK  
SPRING/SUMMER 2014  
OVERSIZED JACKET WITH  
WOVEN INTERIOR PATTERNS



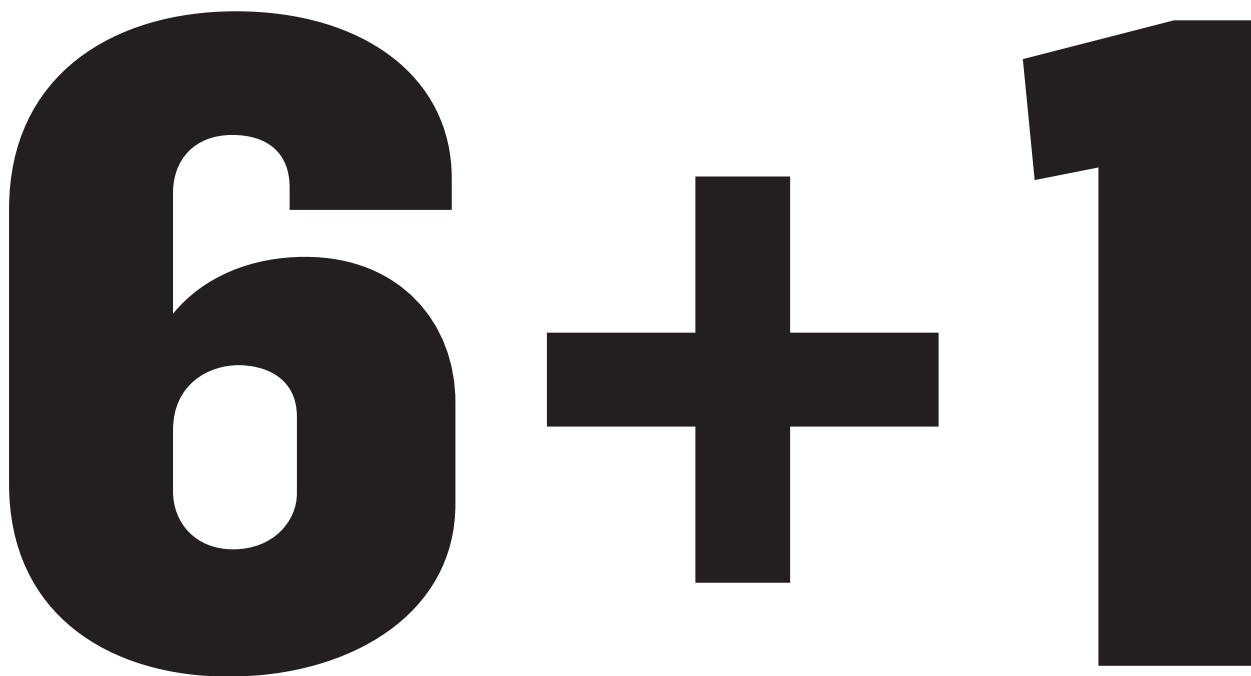
PETER PILOTTO  
SPRING/SUMMER 2012  
PRINTED SLIT SILK DRESS  
WITH EMBROIDERED BEADS



‘The contrasts amongst the Antwerp Six brought tensions, but we also reinforced one another, because those tensions generated new impulses. Everyone wanted to show what he or she was capable of. That is also part of the secret of the Six: because of those tensions and cross-fertilizations, we got the best out of ourselves.’

— MARINA YEE

# THE WONDER YEARS OF THE ANTWERP



BY KAREN VAN GODTSENHOVEN, MOMU – FASHION MUSEUM CURATOR, PROVINCE OF ANTWERP

## INTRODUCTION

The story of the Antwerp Six plus One<sup>1</sup> is so relentlessly examined and retold in different versions that it has almost grown into mythical proportions. The story is so central to the history of the Antwerp Fashion Department, that we deemed it necessary to talk to as many people involved as possible, so as to get the facts straight. In-depth interviews were conducted with the Six plus One and the most important people. This story particularly sheds light on the 'wonder years' of the Antwerp Six and Martin Margiela, from their friendship at the academy onwards (1976–1982), to their early careers in Belgium (1980–1985) until the breakthrough of the Antwerp Six and the launch of their solo careers in the late 1980s.

## PROLOGUE: 'AVENUE' ARTICLE AND THE ANTWERP CONTEXT

Belgium, Flanders in the 1970s: Ann Demeulemeester, Walter Van Beirendonck, Dirk Van Saene, Marina Yee and Martin Margiela grow up in the province, often reading fashion magazines (*Viva*, *Avenue*), hungry for some-

thing outside their little town. Dirk Bikkembergs grows up in Germany. Only Dries Van Noten grows up in the city, closely acquainted with the fashion business through his family's menswear shops (Nutson's in Essen and later Van Noten Couture in Antwerp): he travels with his dad and co-organizes fashion shows from the age of twelve. Most of the Six plus One attend drawing or arts school during their teens, with varying artistic ambitions ranging from architecture to painting, not necessarily aspiring to be fashion designers. Three of them (Martin Margiela, Walter Van Beirendonck and Marina Yee) read an article in *Avenue*, a Dutch magazine for the cultural elite which combined dreamy fashion images with poetry, philosophical quotes or intellectual statements. The specific article read by the three youngsters was called 'With both feet in the clouds', written in 1975 by Agnes Adriaenssens, a fashion journalist who often wrote about the Antwerp arts and music scene for the Belgian edition of *Avenue*. The article starts with a bleak picture of the Belgian fashion and textiles industry, where most people just copy Paris and mostly, Chanel. The sharp-witted author complains about the 'retrograde mentality' of the patrons of the Belgian fashion industry who think that nothing coming out of their own country will be good enough to







## CATALOGUE

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