

Design round-up: bespoke and limited edition pieces are all the rage

The unique works and objects of desire that are making waves in Brussels and soon at Tefaf

By Emma Crichton-Miller
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Steel bottles by Lukasz Friedrich at Galerie Philia

The Brussels-based Collectible fair, dedicated to bespoke and limited edition contemporary design, has become a firm fixture in the calendar. Founded in 2018 and based in the city's vast 1930s Vanderborcht building, it opens its third edition just before Tefaf, hoping to catch collectors on their way to Maastricht.

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Founders Clélie Debehault and Liv Vaisberg, both originally collectors themselves, established Collectible to support young designers as well as galleries showing ambitious “functional art” from Belgium and beyond.

“There is a whole world between art and design that is as exciting as art,” Vaisberg says. Debehault agrees: “We wanted to show collectors that they can collect design the same way they already collect art.”

Unique pieces and very limited editions are a speciality here, and the fair is supported by all three major Belgian design museums — Design Museum Gent, CID Grand-Hornu and ADAM in Brussels. Brussels itself, which had no existing design fair but a profusion of collectors, was an ideal location.



Ceramic sculpture by Merete Rasmussen at Puls Ceramics

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Although many of Collectible's leading design galleries are based in London, Paris, New York or further afield, there is a strong concentration from Belgium: "We have Maniera, we have Victor Hunt and Valerie Traan in Antwerp," Vaisberg says. "We also have smaller galleries like Impermanent Collection, and Atelier Jaspers." Other Brussels-based institutions showing at Collectible include the community of young designers working in the Zaventem Ateliers, founded in 2018 by architect and designer Lionel Jadot.

Daniel Lebard, a French collector now based in Brussels, sees "invention and creativity everywhere" in his adopted country. He dates the proclivity of the Belgians for design to 1926, when the Belgian pioneer of Art Nouveau, Henry Van de Velde, founded the now renowned Brussels architecture and design school, La Cambre.



'Setting up a cabinet: Theo de Meyer with Arthur Dekker' (2014-2017) at Atelier Jaspers © Max Kesteloot

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Over thirty years of collecting, Lebard has extended his reach from French designers of the 1950s to the contemporary designer Xavier Lust, known for his technique of shaping metal. Nathalie Guiot, meanwhile, another French collector based in Brussels who runs the Fondation Thalie, has been acquiring design pieces for the last three or four years: “It is as if a switch has been flicked in Belgium,” she says.

One reason, as she points out, is that Brussels is only 100 miles away from Rotterdam, arguably Europe’s main centre for design: “Ghent and Antwerp are also very avant-garde — the Flemish and Dutch generally are very edgy.”

One of Guiot’s favourite galleries is Maniera in Brussels. They specialise in commissioning design from artists and architects, including the Belgian artist Valérie Mannaerts and the Indian collaborative practice Studio Mumbai. Amaryllis Jacobs, one of the space’s co-founders, says, “We only invite people who do not make furniture to make furniture.” The work, while generally sober in keeping with Belgian taste, is always thought-provoking.

“A few years ago, we were nowhere,” reflects Jacobs. “We all helped create a market here. We are still discovering who’s who and what they want.”

March 5-8, collectible.design

Design is also one of the big stories at this year’s Tefaf. The Design section of the main fair is radically enlarged, and of the 25 new galleries to have won a place at the fair this year, no fewer than six specialise in the field.

Christophe Van de Weghe, Tefaf’s Chairman of Modern and Contemporary, admits he’s a fan: “I have been collecting design personally since the early 1990s.” But it’s not just that: other major art fairs are increasingly incorporating design sections, or have launched parallel fairs specialising in it. “Collectors want to have design of the same calibre as their art,” Van de Weghe suggests. “We try to get people who are the best in their field,” he says.

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'Pink Glass' from 'Stone Age' series (2019) by Alissa Volchkova

François Laffanour of Paris Galerie Downtown is a veteran: his space has shown in Maastricht for almost 15 years, when they were one of only two galleries to offer design. "People were worried by what it could be," he laughs. Their solution at first was to provide a focused display of 1950s French pieces designed by architects such as Le Corbusier, Pierre Jeanneret and Charlotte Perriand.

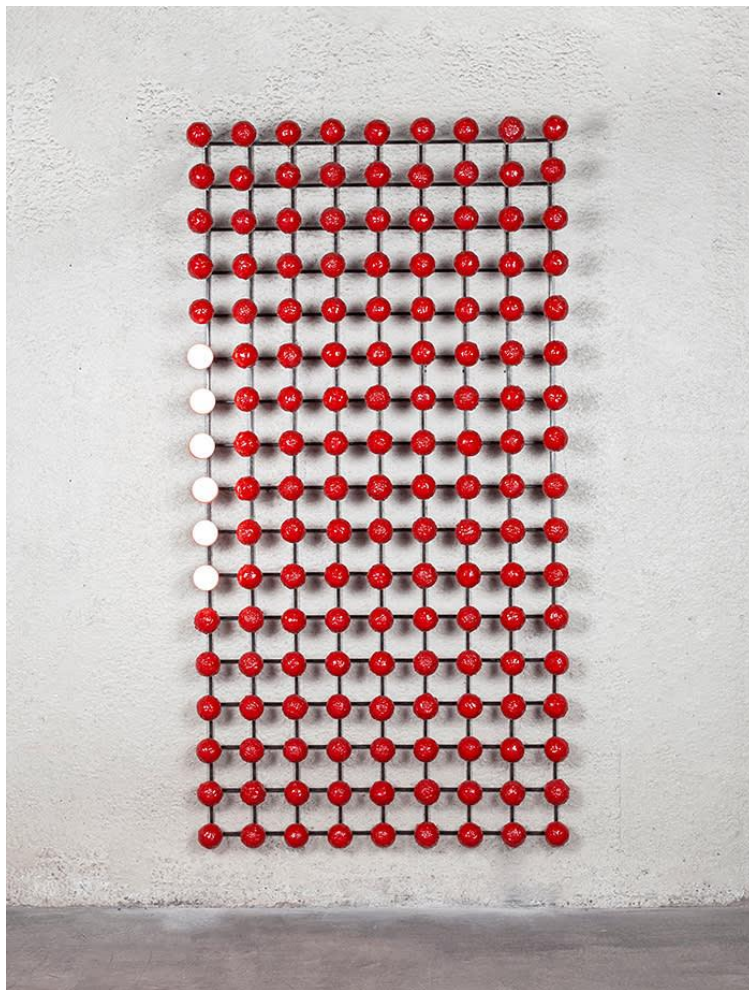
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“At first, collectors bought all sorts of things,” Laffanour says. “Now they are looking at; they understand they are buying a piece of history.” This year, he’s including rediscovered pieces of furniture by the French architect Pierre Parat, well-known in the 1970s and 1980s, created for his own home in the late 1960s.

Oscar Graf, meanwhile, a London- and Paris-based specialist in late-19th and early 20th-century design who’s here for a second year, is pushing the boundaries, arguing that a design section doesn’t make sense without including Art Nouveau or even earlier work. His selection includes stained-glass windows by Edward Burne-Jones, as well as works by A.W. Pugin, C.F.A. Voysey, Edward William Godwin and Christopher Dresser.

Marc Benda of New York’s Friedman Benda is participating for the first time — and happy to be surrounded by such variety: “Design history is not hermetic,” he argues. “A lot of the designers we work with see themselves in a context that goes back far beyond the 20th century.”



‘Wall clothes hanger from Casa Carenza, Padua’ (1939) by Gaetano Pesce at Friedman Benda

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For his part, Benda, inspired by the scholarship of the best Old Master and Antiquities dealers, wants to bring “the same level of scrutiny to our field”.

His selection of works by the Italian postwar designers, Gaetano Pesce and Ettore Sottsass, and the Japanese master, Shiro Kuramata, will be underpinned by extensive research.

“This is not a presentation of old furniture,” he says. “It is a presentation of major artefacts.”

For his part, Loic le Gaillard, co-owner of Carpenters Workshop Gallery, is bringing large-scale works by Nacho Carbonell and Ingrid Donat.

“Collectors are looking for extraordinary pieces with a very high quality of workmanship,” he says.

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