
New Belgian Delight

An interview with Flemish designer Glenn Martens after his propitious Parisian debut

by Silvia Bombardini

A graceful new entry into the ever so exclusive schedule of Paris Fashion Week, Glenn Martens is the bright young thing everyone is talking about. With his Belgian pedigree, impressive education, and experience at at Gaultier, this comes as no surprise. Martens' debut collection boasts high constructive tailoring with novel wit, flawlessly balancing pleated organza with elastic waistlines. Martens talked to Zoo about his hometown and childhood in the 90s, and how it continues to influence his work today.

Silvia Bombardini: Growing up in Bruges, you would not have been exposed to a lot of high fashion. While the city is reputed for its delightful crocheted lace, it wasn't a big influence on you. Tell me about your childhood and fashion, and what people wore there in the late 80s and 90s.

Glenn Martens: Bruges is a small provincial town in the shadow of medieval architecture that reflects what the city used to be. As with any other small Flemish town, fashion is definitely not the asset of the city. It's a proper, safe and clean town... and I suspect the inhabitants dress by the exact same rules. Nevertheless, it used to be the opposite. When the French queen Joan I of Navarre entered the city in the 13th century, she exclaimed at the sight of all those richly dressed wives of wealthy Brugian businessmen, "I thought I was the only queen, but here I see many!" And Mary of Burgundy, another enigmatic figure for the city who was the last countess of Flanders, was a historic beauty and the wealthiest heiress of the medieval world. She came to her end at the age of 25 by falling from her horse. That scene, her dressed in beautiful gowns, agonizing under her horse, has probably been the

main subject of my childhood drawings. I think it was more the overdose of these kind of legends and stories that colored my youth in Bruges, not how 'the living' were dressed.

S.B.: What about your family and yourself? Was there a very classy uncle, or any particular 'living' influence in your upbringing?

G.M.: The two sides of my family are very opposite to one another. On my mother's side, all men, for several generations, served in the army. My grandfather was a colonel and my grandmother is the daughter of a general. This leads to a very classic and traditional childhood with strict and decent family values and a slight feeling of being part of a 'clan.' My grandmother is still breeding us like a chicken on her eggs.

My father's dad was quite a successful artist, living in the free 60s. His medium was mirrors and as you can imagine, they reflected a strong ego. As a result, my uncles and aunts are all true individuals, open-minded, with a very specific character of their own.

Growing up between those worlds you're forming a duality of your own. I believe it formed me to become a very serious person...with a tendency to explode. During my student life, I always managed to get good grades at school. But once that was settled, no one stopped me from hitchhiking through Europe, climbing on churches, or indulging in any other kind of stupidity to let off steam.

S.B.: I read that you went on to study interior architecture, is that right? Many great designers share a past as enthusiastic architecture students: there are principles, some sort of balance, and a certain dimensional imagination that seem to perfectly apply to fashion as well.

Do you believe that your previous education can be seen in your approach towards fashion today?

G.M.: I've always loved fashion and beautifully dressed women. But growing up in a little provincial town, it never occurred to me that fashion was a craft to study for. I did want to study something artistic. Interior architecture was just creative enough, and it was also 'serious' enough.

I'm sure that degree has a big influence in the way I perceive a garment. I almost see my clothes as constructions. I'm always focused on finding new techniques, new concepts to build up my pieces. No line or ornament is there for the sole pleasure of the eye. Each detail has a main constructive importance; the seam is placed there and could not be anywhere else. Take it away and the piece falls apart. It's definitely not the easiest way of designing but it makes it fun. It's a daily challenge.

S.B.: Nonetheless, your fashion design training is as impressive as it could be: you graduated first in your class from the internationally-acclaimed Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp, which was once the cradle of the celebrated Antwerp Six. What was the atmosphere at the Academy like, and what was the most important thing you learnt there?

G.M.: Thank you! I do think I'm very lucky. The Academy was such an intense but great experience! The level is very high and for four years, the only thing you actually do is work. It's like living on some kind of island of fabrics and patterns with your crazy classmates as the only other inhabitants. These classmates are all talented, extravagant and are the most creative kids from all over the world. The pressure can get



portrait Glenn Martens

really high. The main thing you're discovering at the Academy is yourself. First you're all surprised by the massive amount of work you can handle. And then you're discovering your identity. That's what the whole school was about: you needed to create a world of your very own. Regardless of the style, what you did had to be honest down to the slightest detail; it had to be you.

S.B.: Could you name some other Belgian designers whom you admire nowadays and why?

G.M.: There are a lot of designers I appreciate, from Belgium or elsewhere, always for very different reasons. From the Belgian school I would select Raf Simons for his renewing proportions, Bruno Pieters for helping to change the world with his fair and ecological, new and beautiful brand 'Honest by.' Véronique Branquinho for her women. Dries Van Noten for his color and Bernhard Willhelm for the joy.

S.B.: Can you tell me about your experience with Jean Paul Gaultier as well? It seems to me that there could be so much to learn from him too: unique artisanal ways, a legendary audacity and evergreen passion... In which ways, if any, do you believe he influenced your taste, technique or imagination?

G.M.: The main thing I've learned at Gaultier is the importance of 'having fun.' It seems this *bon vivant* is laughing through life. When designing, you're supposed to talk through your deepest emotions. Still, at the end, your art has to deal with a massive business. Months of hard work is only guaranteed through one week of sales. Critics can be harsh. I suppose it's okay to say this job can be a bitch. Why would one even bother if he's not having fun doing it? So I think even if the result does not always looks as fun... I assure you I'm having a blast making it!

S.B.: And in February this year you launched your own eponymous womenswear line, which



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photo: Joseph Molines

was immediately picked by Didier Grumbach - head of the French Federation of Couture and Ready-to-Wear - to debut at Parisian Fashion Week. How did you prepare yourself for this? What did you expect and what did you meet?

G.M.: We were actually aiming for a slow start - taking it easy, step by step. Nevertheless, I decided to send out our file to Mr. Grumbach. Why not give it a shot? I never expected such positive feedback! Suddenly you are there, accepted into the official calendar of Paris Fashion Week. This means you're obliged to organize a proper presentation, organize proper sales, set up an official company, PR, find reliable manufacturers etc. It was really the amount of sudden work that made me dizzy. You're locked out from the world for six months with one sole goal - finishing this collection. I didn't really have time to think about what was really happening. Today, two months after the launch, I'm able to look back and I really am super grateful and impressed by all that has happened!

S.B.: You once said that you see your brand more like a family of helping friends. Tell me about them? Who supported you during those busy months and how did you meet such a wonderfully reliable team?

G.M.: My friends mean the world to me. As it happens, they just popped up in life randomly. Most of them are dealing with completely different worlds. When my close friend and business partner Rain Laurent and I decided to make this collection, we did not have a result of these proportions in mind. We're building up this label by ourselves and have nobody to back us up. All was calculated around making a collection and being able to produce it. All the rest was seen as an extra. Without this family of friends we would never have managed such a perfect result. Everybody helped with what he or she could do best: from making films to accountancy, helping out with patterns, modelling to serving beers... and drinking them!

S.B.: The presentation was held in Le Marais, in an intimate, private space draped in antique tapestries and dappled with azure glints of video projections, in a dreamy overlap of sweet nostalgia and expectations. The models walked around quietly, almost pensively, lulled by some strangely calming, evocative baroque music. Where did the idea come from? How does it relate to yourself and your designs?

G.M.: When I first saw the gallery, the white rectangle split up by heavy columns, it did evoke the nave of a cathedral. Since one of my main graphic inspirations was an altarpiece by Hans Memling, it seemed just logical to built up the presentation as seen through a church. Having the altarpiece projected on one end and translating this painting on the opposite side by placing a model in front of a carpet like a medieval Madonna portrayed in front of a brocade, I was seeking a very private atmosphere. I wanted to give visitors the time they needed to discover who this new kid is, invite them to discover my world through graphics, music and videos... giving them a moment of peace during the hectic Paris Fashion Week.



S.B.: There is, in your collection, some sort of reassuring, light equilibrium - an exactitude of measures and fresh, candid asymmetry. The silhouettes are slender, panelled but emotional, easy and mysterious like a hide and seek game echoing down the aisles of a cathedral. Bruges was your first source of inspiration. How did you translate the weathered, elegantly medieval appeal of your hometown in your work?

G.M.: Since nobody had really heard from me before this debut, I felt the need to establish the aesthetic of the label. It's like giving out guidelines for how to read 'Glenn Martens' for now and the future. I started out by dissecting my personal world, studying what I love, what moves me. I concluded that on all art platforms, everything I love relates back to my personal view of the city I grew up in. Bruges does have this unique vibe of a historic metropolis that has been reinvented as a touristic hot spot. It's a surreal place to grow up in, colored by that clinch of opposite worlds. You'll probably always find a hint of this duality in everything I will do.

The verticality of the collection relates directly to the sleek Gothic cathedrals. I believe there is a parallel in both views of construction. As in a cathedral, keystones are holding up the vaults; in my garments, a single pleat makes the whole piece. Just as a flying buttress guides our eyes to the heights of a Gothic church, playing with the rhythms of the building as a hide and seek game, the vertical cut of a dart, a seam or a pleat elongates the silhouette and guides your eye up to the smile of the woman wearing the piece. My aim always is to grace the woman and surround her with elegance.

S.B.: The cover image of your inspiration book comes from the successful short novel 'Bruges-la-Morte,' written by Georges Rodenbach in 1892. It's a symbolic, thrilling work linking the city with another favorite topic you explored in your collection - that of dualism and the double, with all its mysteries and Hitchcockian drama.



Could you tell us something about it? How does it take shape in your looks?

G.M.: This duality indeed evokes the clinch of worlds I was talking about. There is always a downfall to the purity of Romanism. A pure elegance would be too easy, there is always more to it. We're trying to reflect the clinch in our use of materials; we've reinterpreted the bomber jacket out of a dusty couture material as moiré. Handmade bustier dresses are made out of basic nylon. I wanted the unexpected. All dresses and skirts have pockets; each piece has its secret in a hidden slit. For this, I believe the collection relates to all women: a woman to discover, a woman with a secret, and every woman has her secret.

S.B.: Speaking about women, the female protagonist of Rodenbach's story is Jane Scott, a dancer whose ill-fated beauty leads her to a tragic, very theatrical ending. Do you ever have a character in mind, a special muse when you design?

G.M.: I love women, I love history, I love historic women. I feel their stories are a never-ending source of inspiration. I don't exactly design for a certain personality. I'm more fascinated by different types of women and I try to feel their world, imagine their life. I do admit that every few months there is a new story, a new character, which I'm obsessed with. When she strikes, I need to know all about her. In the past years I've flirted with Agnès Sorel, La Paiva, Lee Miller, Romy Schneider... Lately I've been slightly obsessed with the life of Elizabeth Siddal - one of history's first top models, the muse of the pre-Raphaelites, a torn independent woman with a tragic beauty. British model Bianca O'Brien had the kindness to put on my collection to shoot the lookbook. Her resemblance with Elizabeth was striking. I was overexcited!

S.B.: A taste for a peculiar, wildly allegorical style of painting is also present in your film and website, with images of distinctively Flemish works by Rogier van der Weyden, Jan Van Eyck or indeed Hans Memling, whom you mentioned before. What makes these iconic portraits so fascinating for you, so relevant still today, and for such a contemporary collection?

G.M.: I relate to their obsession for detail. Up close, you can actually see the hairs of the velvet on coats. Nevertheless, even if they mastered capturing nature's detail in all its wealth and precision, they did not master correct perspectives yet. This deformation is accentuated by symbolic hierarchies. Certain figures are by importance obliged to be represented bigger than other ones, even if their place in the setting is to the back. The combination of realistic detailing, with distorted perspectives and proportions makes each painting a surrealist masterpiece. I feel their work is as contemporary as it can get. Add that each element has a main symbolic importance, making it almost impossible to get the full meaning of the painting... I'm hooked!

S.B.: Some more recent, mild and tender 90s vibe, perhaps, could be felt too. The thoughtful reinterpretation of the bomber jacket you were talking about, light-washed denims and white platform sneakers... Did these also come from your cherished memories of Bruges, somehow

filtered by the teenage years you spent there? Now that you're based in Paris, do you feel homesick?

G.M.: I can't deny that I am a child of the 90s. I think most of us look back with nostalgia to the teenage years. Still, I don't miss the period nor the city. Paris has a vibe which is addictive. After living here for almost four years I still can't say that I know the city. I don't think I'll ever properly know it. I definitely don't feel homesick at all. I've got two godchildren in Bruges who give me plenty of reasons to go back to my hometown on a most regular basis!

S.B.: It's really impressive though how wearable, comfortable and almost casual your pieces can look and feel, despite this richness of inspiration and the unique virtuosity of their construction. It's almost a perspective illusion - a surface simplicity and a hidden, precious marvel of the intellect.

G.M.: Thank you! Even though the pieces look quite structured, they have been imagined to be extremely comfortable. Behind the pleat or the panel there is a hidden volume which allows an easy fit. I really tried to give a tailored look while using different materials like jersey to break down the strict feeling. Skirts and dresses are built through a careful working of pleats. In other pieces, we played with zips - opening up silhouettes, or sleeking them down, taking off layers or sleeves. Each woman can embody the garment to her own person. This is what really matters to me.

S.B.: You've mastered the use of diverse, unexpected materials and fabrics - from translucent silks and nylons to casual jersey and that dusty, teal blue moiré, organza and cashmere all produced in Europe, and recycled wool as well. Would you say that young designers today are actually more concerned with the environment, more aware and conscious perhaps than those who came before them? How difficult is it to get hold of 'green' fabrics?

G.M.: I feel my generation is one of the first to have grown up while hearing the alarm bells ring. My mother definitely thought I was quite special when I forced her to recycle at the age of ten. By now the damage has been done and we can only work on preventing it from growing. I do feel more and more people are becoming aware of the problem. We have no other choice. Today, if you want, you can get almost everything 'green.' For most of people in the business, it's just a matter of choice. We do try to include as many 'green' fabrics as possible into our work. Sadly though, 'green' suppliers often build their business around big quantities, making it impossible for young designers with small collections to meet their high minimum orders.

S.B.: Now make a wish. Where do you hope to be in five years?

G.M.: Exactly where I am right now. Designing collections, making beautiful things but without constraints, being able to have full artistic freedom without having to say no to certain wishes. That would be perfect!

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photo: Spela Kasal