

Craft works

In our continued quest to bring to the fore those that usually take a backseat, we visit five specialised ateliers who have just as big a hand in that table you're sitting at or that glass you're drinking from than the actual designer. It's a well-known fact: behind every great designer lies a great craftsman.

Photographer VEERLE FRISSEN Interviews SARAH SCHUG

Leather

RALPH BAGGALEY

Chicago-born Ralph Baggaley came to Europe about four decades ago and has since clocked up more than 30 years of leatherworking experience. Whilst playing nomad in the 70s, living on Amsterdam houseboats and in a hippie commune in Ghent, the American native started playing around with cloths and later leather, selling his self-made bags, wallets and belts on markets. After several years at renowned Belgian leather companies Delvaux and S-en-ciel, the talented autodidact finally opened his very own studio, filled with all types of sewing machines, countless different knives, cutters, hole punches, thinning tools and, of course, all kinds of leather – from poisonous Australian frogs to Colombian crocodiles or pythons. “I like leather that has a natural look to it and a good feel, that is not plasticky. I've been to so many places looking at leather to find the right one. Nowadays I know where to go and who sells what. The most expensive is calf leather. It can cost up to 80 euros a square meter,” Baggaley explains. He not only makes the obvious leather products such as bags, belts or wallets, but also uses the material to construct daybeds, decorate furniture or bedheads. His clients include hotels but also designers such as Maarten De Ceulaer, for whom he made a stand out leather collection which stirred up quite some attention in Belgium and abroad. But Baggaley's true passion are his own creations, where he does everything from design to end product: “A true, complete craftsman is a real all-rounder who is able to do every single step of the process himself. But these are the ones that are dying out. The big companies hire workers who only learn one part of the chain and do that for the rest of their lives. Here, everything has to be your specialty.”





Metal

HUGUES D'OUTREMENT

If metalwork makes you think of kitschy ornaments and swirls, Hugues d'Oultrement will quickly prove you otherwise. Working mostly with interior designers, decorators, architects and antiquarians, the craftsman makes everything from table feet to lamps and interior assemblage, always in a modern and sober style. "Metal is beautiful and has a very decorative aspect. I like its minimal but rigid aesthetics. With metal you have endless possibilities and it lasts forever," he says as a way of explaining his passion. After having learned welding and all the basic techniques in a forge and later in a metal art workshop, he opened his own studio four years ago. "Quality is the most important thing, so you need to learn the basics. After that it's mostly learning by doing because you hardly make anything twice. I constantly have to do things that I've never done before. You have your skills and then you have to adapt them and use them in the right way. It's a bit like always doing a new prototype," he tells us. A metalworker's job is a dirty and at times dangerous one, requiring eye and ear protection: "It's very loud and you burn yourself a lot, you just have to love it." d'Oultrement obviously does, mastering all steps from cutting the cold metal to brazing, assembling, finishing and painting. Besides working for established designers such as William Leroy, he also makes his own creations, giving him an artistic understanding that facilitates the collaboration with the designers. His mission: to renew the image of metalwork. "There is a chance to completely redefine the craft and make things that are much more contemporary which some craftsmen already showed during the minimalism of the 60s and 70s. I'm sure that if we renew the image even youngsters could get interested in the art of metalwork again," he concludes.

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Wood

WALNUTSGROOVE

The craftsmen at Walnutsgroove, located on a sprawling 1300 square meter former paint factory, pride themselves on making creations that exist outside the norm. They recently helped build the new Google offices in Belgium, including a walk-in, sound-proof apple (as a reference to Magritte) serving as a phone booth. They also work closely with designers such as Alain Bertheau from innovative Belgian design collective Objekten or Marina Bautier, for whom Walnutsgroove created a daybed and a coat hanger. And in Paris they're making quite a name for themselves too with a bar they're constructing for the acclaimed French design hub Pool for instance. Founders Frédéric Deswattines and Fabian Daxhelet, who both studied design at La Cambre, focus on design furniture, produced either as unique pieces or in a small series: "It's not easy nowadays for designers to find a place where they can produce five to 100 pieces. We have a quite unique position, right between the big factories and the one-man workshops," they explain. What's more, carpentry has changed quite a lot recently, and it is hard to find those who know how to combine traditional woodworking with operating the newest cutting machines: "The newest technology works a bit like digital printing: We receive a file, put it inside, and a cut-out object comes out. But the assembling and finishing afterwards still needs to be done by hand." The wood they work with, mostly oak, mainly comes from Belgium and is of the best quality: "It needs to be dried very well, otherwise you get problems with the stability," one of the eight woodworkers explains. Unlike other crafts, the art of woodworking is here to stay: "Even if the design world doesn't need us anymore tomorrow, people will always need kitchens or doors," Deswattines says.

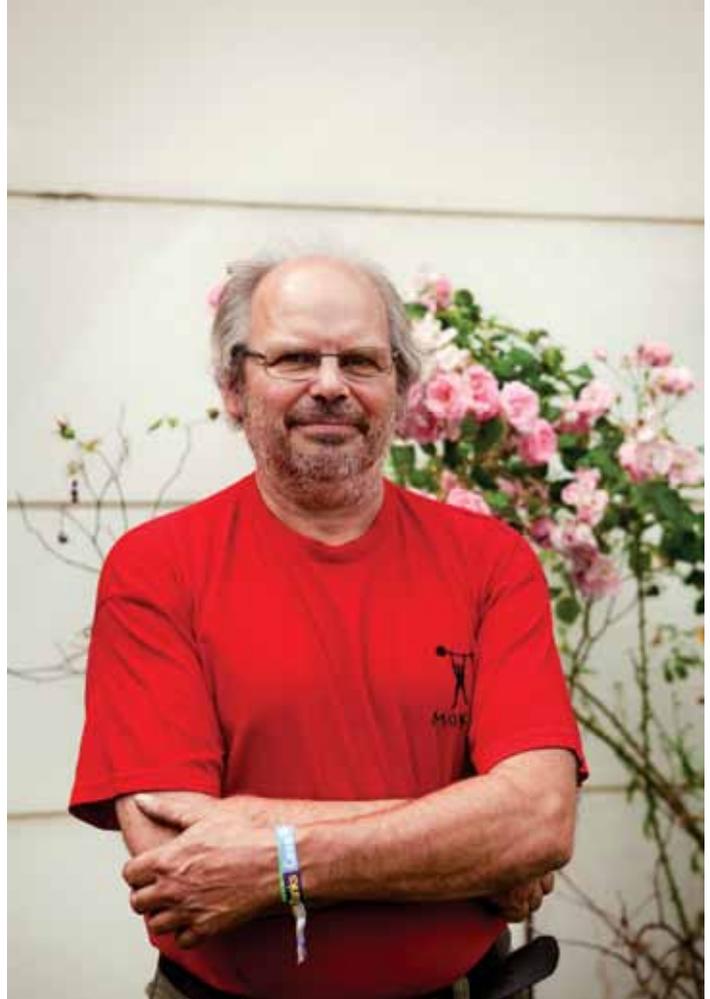
walnutsgroove.com



Metal MOKER

Moker's metal sculptures can be found almost anywhere in the world, and chances are you've already spotted at least one of them. They can be seen inside Brussels Airport (with 24 meters their biggest creation so far), London's galleries or in public places in Brussels, Antwerp and even Singapore. Moker's business has nothing to do with metalwork in its traditional sense. Instead of building balconies or staircases, the company creates artworks for internationally renowned artists such as Dan Graham, Thomas Houseago, Peter Downsbrough or Luk Van Soom. This makes their craft quite a special one: they cannot build on standardised solutions – every piece is a first and completely unique. "We have to rethink metalwork," founder Flor Broes, a studied engineer and entirely self-taught metal craftsman, explains. "We are forced to invent new processes, even write new computer programmes at times, use rarely tested tooling, create new machinery and use metal in ways it has never been used before." Moker is at the artist's side from beginning to the end, from deciphering his or her idea to making the construction plans and finally building the object, which can take up to several months. "A large part of our work is engineering – we have to calculate everything keeping in mind the weight, mass, rigidity, flexibility, tension and so on," Broes says. Moker is completely involved in the artistic process, helping the artist, who sometimes only shows up with a sketchy drawing on a little piece of paper, to put his idea into practice, stretching the definition of a metalworker. Even for seemingly impossible constructions they find pioneering solutions. "It's a difficult and challenging job, but I wouldn't want to do anything else. I am proud to be involved in creating artworks and thus helping to make the world a better place," Broes concludes.

moker.be





Glass ARTGLAS

When John Dierickx, who founded Artglas in 2002, tells people that he works with stained glass, almost everyone thinks of church windows although that couldn't be further from reality. Artglas makes sober and contemporary stained glass creations that can be placed as windows, in furniture, in doors or as stand alone art objects. "When I started many years ago, the farmer style was everywhere. But when that market fell away and everything became more modern, I had to rethink the business," Dierickx explains. With the goal of modernising a 1,000 year old craft, he started making his own designs, working with clear lines, circles and lots of white glass to keep it bright, adding only splashes of colour to avoid it becoming too dominating. One year later he received the Design Vlaanderen quality label for his refreshing, innovative approach. The famous Belgian design duo Studio Job took notice of his work and hired the glass virtuoso for their redesign of a room in the Groninger Museum. "Working for other designers is very challenging," he says: "Not everything they want is always technically possible, so we have to be able to find very creative solutions. For Studio Job we sawed glass for the very first time, although the usual procedure is to cut it." The self-taught craftsman and his two employees not only work for designers but also for companies and, the biggest part, private clients. The process is always the same and, as most other crafts, does not require any big expensive machines: A glass cutter for straight lines, one for curved lines, a solder and the tool kit is almost complete. Based on drawings and calculations, the glass workers cut the glass, make a frame out of lead, place the glass pieces inside, solder and finally clean it – a process that depending on the design can take anything up from one hour to two months. Dierickx gets his supplies from a world-famous glass manufacturing company in Germany: "Most of the glass we use is handmade, something that's not done in Belgium anymore and even throughout Europe is hard to find," he explains. So is the art of glasswork threatened? "The biggest threat is that one day the demand stops," Dierickx answers: "That's why we are trying to bring it back to life by giving it a contemporary touch and a new image."



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