

# THE GENTEEL



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## CULTURE

### Six Figures

by [Semmi W.](#) | Posted September 26, 2012

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Belgium's seminal Antwerp Six. Source: [visitflanders.co.uk](#).

To take the fashion world by storm usually requires more than just a rented truck. But in the late 1980s, that's exactly what the Antwerp Six did. Made up of [Dries van Noten](#), [Dirk van Saene](#), [Walter van Beirendonck](#), [Ann Demeulemeester](#), [Dirk Bikkembergs](#) and Marina Yee, the infamous group of designers communicated a new language in fashion. Instead of adhering to the '80s mantra of gaudy excess, the Antwerp Six embraced avant-garde design. As Yee explained to the *Wall Street Journal*, "There were just a handful of designers in Belgium at that time and fashion in the '80s was a very somber, highly individualistic pursuit."

After graduating from the fashion program at Antwerp's [Royal Academy of Fine Arts](#) in the early 1980s, the group rented a truck, packed their collections, and set off to takeover the 1986 or 1987 (sources conflict on the exact year) London Fashion Week. The young designers may have attended the same academic program in Antwerp, but their styles proved to be remarkably different.

During the British Designer Show in London, van Noten showcased his collection using fine fabrics and

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Dries van Noten has become a cult fashion force since emerging from the Antwerp Six.  
Source: tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com.

inspirations from North Africa and India. While speaking at New York's **French Institute Alliance Française** in March 2012 for the institute's final installment of its spring *Fashion Talks* series, van Noten **explained his creative reasoning**, "I prefer ugly things. I prefer things which are surprising... clothes is just something you put on to cover yourself ... fashion is a way to communicate."

Meanwhile Demeulemeester or "Ann of Antwerp" (as she became known) focused on deconstructed, androgynous pieces. Choosing to work in mostly black and white, Demeulemeester introduced what has now become her trademark - eccentric tailoring and dark escapism. After her first Paris show in 1991, Cathy Horyn noted in

the *Washington Post*, "her clothes, in their sultry bleakness, reflect the more destructive side of fashion."

Throughout the '80s and '90s, van Beirendonck exploited unusual colour combinations and a bold sense of humour to deliver edgy pieces; while Yee evoked gloomy moods with fine leathers. Instead of riding the wave of giant shoulder pads and over-the-top patterns, members like Bikkembergs and van Saene blatantly catered to their own interests. For Bikkembergs, it was his love for European football and street trends. Van Saene, on the other hand, has made it a point to avoid even having a signature style. Each of his collections are linked illogically, reflecting figments of a complex, ever-evolving imagination.

With the city of Antwerp dotted on the international fashion map, the group solidified Belgium's status as a bastion of talent. Antwerp became the capital of fashion anarchy. Frayed edges, minimal accents and a preference for deconstructed tailoring all became ways to quietly contest excessiveness and luxury. In an interview with *Women's Wear Daily*, Linda Loppa, an influential mentor to the group, explained, "that's the strength of Belgian designers. They want to be in charge." Loppa, a pioneer in Belgium fashion, observed how the focused intensity of indie designers influences Antwerp's retailers: "In the shops, Belgian designers have a good sell-through. It's not always in the window, but it's what people buy. You always find good trousers, good sweaters, good jackets," she said. "We're too focused on a good garment, that the fit is good, the sizes are good, the delivery is good, that it's selling. It's a very honest way of working."

Kris Van Assche, Peter Pilotto, Bruno Pieters, Veronique Branquinho, **Bernhard Willhelm** and **Raf Simons**, have all undoubtedly, drawn inspiration from the Antwerp Six. But unlike their predecessors, they've been more willing to flirt with foreign stakeholders and conglomerates.

Much like his approach to tailoring, Simons has carefully reworked the Antwerp Six model of entrepreneurial rebellion into a style better suited to his career goals. While working and living in Antwerp, Simons launched his "Raf Simons" and "Raf by Raf Simons" collections. Choosing to build his own brand did not stop him from taking the helm of bigger labels - first with Jil Sander and now Christian Dior.

A former intern for van Beirendonck, Simons told *Paper Coffin Magazine* how working in the designer's studio sparked his career: "He [van Beirendonck] took me to Paris. He had a presentation of clothes where the furniture and everything was specially done, and that's what I did. And that was also the period that some of the Antwerp scene designers, the six from Antwerp, started showing." Simons was trained as an industrial designer and had no formal fashion education. In the same interview, he recalls how the experience with van Beirendonck introduced him to other notable designers. "Martin Margiela, for example, had his first and his second show there. And I saw that, and that's where the click came. Because I remember, when I saw Martin Margiela's show I was already like, 'I'm wrong. I don't want to do industrial design.'"

Martin Margiela is often credited as being part of the original Antwerp Six, but he did not take part in the group's fateful road trip. Nor did he showcase his debut in London during the same year. Instead, Margiela headed to Paris to work under the tutelage of Jean Paul Gaultier. Despite his departure to a different fashion capital, Margiela still held on to the same anti-establishment ideals of his Belgian contemporaries.

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The choice to stay reclusive and oppose mainstream ties was quickly followed by Margiela's decision to leave fashion altogether. After being bought out by Italian denim giant Diesel in 2002, Margiela is reported to have stopped his involvement with the label in 2009. Even in exiting his own company, Margiela wanted an Antwerp-based designer to continue directing designs. Before leaving, Margiela reportedly offered Simons and then **Haider Ackermann** the opportunity to take charge of his label.

And in a town of only 500,000 people, what you stand for as a designer is just as important as *how* you stand out.

without taking over the whole picture," van Noten insisted in an interview with *Elle* magazine. "I try to be as independent as possible... I'm part of the fashion system, but I don't want to follow all the rules. I don't want to be contrarian - I just want to do my own things."