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The Men's Wear Designer Keeping a Heritage Brand Cool

Berluti's Kris Van Assche shares the art — and fries shop — that inspires him the most.

By Natalia Rachlin

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Kris Van Assche, the artistic director of [Berluti](#), grew up an only child in Belgium's Flemish-speaking region of Londerzeel, between Antwerp and Brussels. "Nobody I knew was interested in art or fashion, so there was no predestination," says the designer, 43. He credits his paternal grandmother with sparking his love of beauty, saying, "She always set a lovely table and she made all her own clothes — and mine." After graduating from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp, where he studied women's wear, in 1998, Van Assche was offered an internship designing men's wear for Yves Saint Laurent; unsure if he wanted to live in Paris, he decided it would be a good placeholder until he found other work in London, Milan or New York. But then he met [Hedi Slimane](#), at the time the brand's creative director of men's wear, whom he followed to Dior Homme in 2000. Four years later, Van Assche started his own label — conceptual suiting with a sportswear bent — only to return to Dior in 2007 to replace Slimane in the top job.

Since arriving at Berluti last April, Van Assche has imbued the heritage brand, which was founded as a luxury shoe maker in 1895 and later counted Andy Warhol and [Frank Sinatra](#) as regular clients, with a streetwear-inspired edge. At his debut show, he presented leather-embossed logo sweatshirts, graphic motorcycle pants and angular, metal-tipped sneakers alongside hand-cut leather suits and playful iterations of the brand's signature dress shoe. Van Assche was known for his high-low aesthetic during his tenure at Dior Homme, but here, his clothes, from jewel-toned trench coats to boldly colored silk shirts and even a few ostrich-feather-adorned women's looks, feel especially distinct. "I want to respect the brand's DNA while bringing it to a new audience," says Van Assche, who is still in Paris and dedicates much of his off time to seeing and collecting art and midcentury design objects. "The goal is to prove that craftsmanship does not apply only to the traditional or the classic — it can also be contemporary and cool."

"The London-based photographer [Ronan Gallagher](#), whom I've worked with on many projects, took this portrait of me in Paris this past autumn. He's known for his documentary and fashion photography and for working with a warm light that gives his images a saturated sense of depth."

Top left: "I'm a fanatic for 1950s French ceramics, and I first saw this abstract architectural work by Jean Megard, along with several similar pieces, in the house I rented for my summer holiday this August. I was so in love with them that my friends secretly contacted the owner and asked if they might buy one for me. It was such a kind gesture — and now the piece reminds me of my closest friends."

Bottom left: "[Ben Sledsens](#) is a young painter who creates colorful, naïve images of nature and everyday moments, and is one of my favorite Belgian artists. I've had a total crush on his work since I first came across it in 2016 at the [Tim Van Laere Gallery](#) in Antwerp, and have been trying to collect as much as I can, which isn't easy because it's so sought after. I succeeded with this wonderfully vibrant painting, 'Wasp and Yellow Flowers in a Vase' (2018)."

Right: "[Robert Mapplethorpe's](#) 'White Gauze' (1984) was the very first piece of art I purchased for myself. What I see in the work is a couple united in both love and pain. It's love — for better and for worse."

"The print of this coat, part of my debut show for Berluti this past January, mimics that of a marble table in the Berluti factory in Ferrara, Italy. Craftspeople hand-dye shoes, bags and other leather goods on its surface, and season after season different stains sink in, adding to the patina. It's a good metaphor for the brand itself, and I like the idea of having a chic material in a work space — that contrast between the elegant and the rough."

Left: "This is my cat, Frida, named after [Frida Kahlo](#). She's a Burmese and has been with me for seven years. She lives with me in my apartment in Paris. Or rather, I live with her — she's the sweetest but a bit of a queen."

Center: "Here is my old student ID from the academy. It was a tough school, but it was also a great time in my life. I think I was 12 or 13 when I decided I wanted to be in fashion, and the first designers I became aware of — [Jean Paul Gaultier](#) and [Thierry Mugler](#) — worked in Paris. But then I learned that there was a fashion school not far from my home and began waiting for my chance to go."

Left: “Earlier this year, I traveled to Chandigarh, a planned city in northern India that was largely designed by [Le Corbusier](#) and his cousin, Pierre Jeanneret, in the mid-20th century, to work with Ronan on visuals for Berluti’s social media and to shoot our pre-fall collection. This is a picture of the doors at the Palace of Assembly, one of a series of administrative buildings by Le Corbusier known as the Capitol Complex. I’ve always been attracted to their work, but seeing these volumes and colors in person was just incredible.”

Right: “After I returned from Chandigarh, Berluti partnered with [Laffanour Galerie Downtown](#) in Paris to update 17 pieces of original Jeanneret furniture. The gallery team restored the works’ frames, to which Berluti added leather upholstery — each one a different color inspired by my trip. They’re all being presented during this year’s Design Miami fair.”



Right: “This is the best place in central Antwerp for fries. I started going when I was a student, and the same lady still works there today. My friends in Paris make fun of me because I am really very Belgian in this regard: I could happily eat fries every day.”

Left: “I don’t really have idols or muses, but this 1986 image of Sean Penn fighting a paparazzo in New York — as he was known to do while dating Madonna — has a habit of reappearing on my mood boards. It’s not so politically correct, and we all know by now that she didn’t need saving, but I find it outrageously romantic.”

Right: “This is a framed photo from around 1916 of my great-grandfather on what I believe was his wedding day. My grandmother was very fond of him, and I was very fond of her — she’s the one who taught me to sew. The image was important to her, so when she died, I kept it.”

Top left: “Contemporary dance is something I learn a lot from. This is a still from the 1983 debut of [Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker](#)’s ‘Rosas Danst Rosas’ — I saw a live restaging of the work at the Théâtre de la Ville in Paris 10 years ago and was touched by its purity. It’s just four female dancers, and the choreography is based on the repetition of mundane and universal movements. Between the gestures, the chairs and the clothes, it has a minimalist, radical and frankly very Belgian vibe.”

Bottom left: “Since Berluti is known first and foremost as a shoe brand, shoes have become a big part of my job. This one, with shocks of hand-applied patina in cobalt blue, recalls Berluti’s iconic Alessandro model, which originally launched in 1895 and became the brand’s signature design, but we reworked the form and gave it these graphic details. It’s been a pleasant surprise to find that Berluti’s more traditional customers are actually very open to change.”

Right: “I found this 1989 fashion book, ‘Mode in de Lage Landen: België’ (‘Fashion in the Low Countries: Belgium’), around the time I was trying to get into the academy. It’s a real authority on the Antwerp Six, but also discusses other designers you’ve never heard of. It represented everything I wanted to be at the time and, since my acceptance into the school was far from guaranteed, became a sort of wishful-thinking bible.”