

STYLE

BRAVE NEW WORLD

The fashion-forward cities of Antwerp and Tokyo are taking over as the new style capitals, says SAHAR KHAN



À LA MODE

The ModeNatie houses the Flanders Fashion Institute and the fashion museum. *Left:* the standout piece from D'Heygere's collection

ANTWERP

For her graduate show collection, a fanciful amalgam of man and beast called Humanimalus, Stephanie D'Heygere, recent alumnus of the prestigious Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp, included a chocolate blouse with a leather sleeve fashioned into a bird head, with a wooden beak and black and yellow feathers.



"Antwerp style is eclectic," says D'Heygere, head designer of leg wear line BEEN. "It's about expressing individuality." D'Heygere is one in a long line of designers who have broken boundaries and put Antwerp on the forefront of global fashion.

It began in the early '80s, when the renowned Antwerp Six—an avant-garde group of designers who graduated from Royal Academy—ushered in a deconstructed and reassembled look. Ann Demeulemeester, Dries Van Noten, Walter Van Beirendonck, Marina Yee, Dirks Bikkembergs and Van Saene challenged the rule of New York, Paris, Milan and London.

Over the next three decades, the competition only intensified. Antwerp's cloth is cut with an innovative spirit, a calculated whimsy. Notable resident Martin Margiela was at the fore-

front of that undecipherable style. Margiela became both a mainstream magnet and cult icon. Maison Martin Margiela, now headed by a design team, continues his eccentric vision. For spring, they presented a flat, square trench coat, tuxedo jacket and Oxford shirt, stiff as a cardboard and apparently stitched upon one.

This quirky, postmodernist glamour is melded with a classic sensibility in this city of Gothic architecture, art and a thriving diamond trade. Stylish locals, lauded on blogs like Antwerp Fashion Observer, drive home this aesthetic.

Veronique Branquinho, creative director of Delvaux, the world's oldest luxe leather goods company, says, "In Antwerp, you can find the facilities of a metropolis with the cosiness of a charming village."

Much of Antwerp's talent has been exported. Raf Simons designs for German fashion house Jil Sander. Its reductionist philosophy plays well with Simons' clean-cut concepts, like the T-shirt-gown combinations he presented for spring. Dior Homme's artistic director Kris Van Assche presents in Paris, but his look is Belgian. He is a fan of monotone shades and severe cuts, a mark of Antwerp.

There is still a lot of talent in the city. Alexandra Verschuereen, another Royal Academy graduate, won the Hyeres Festival Award for her debut collection, an origami-esque set of paper-thin pieces. She presented standout pieces, like a sand-coloured cape and fairy white dress unfolding in cut-outs. "I think the city has a realistic look towards life," says Verschuereen.

Perhaps it's that very realism that drives homegrown designers to make fantastical yet unexpectedly practical clothes as an escape. >



TOP DESIGNERS

ANN DEMEULEMEESTER

MAISON MARTIN MARGIELA

JIL SANDER

KEY LOOKS:

ALTERNATIVE GLAMOUR WITH CLASSIC ELEMENTS



STREET TALK
The Harajuku girls are a constant source of inspiration.



TOKYO

We all know the story by now: Tokyo is the hub of Asian fashion, the city that veers on the edge of avant-garde. It spawned the Gothic Lolita, the androgynous Visual Kei, and looks inspired by the ubiquitous Hello Kitty, modelled in the neighbourhood of Harajuku. It's made an art out of meshing discarded, outré ideas. There is no more endearingly bizarre contender for fashion's wackiest title. So why has it made our list now? The fashionably evergreen city is in continual evolution and pushes boundaries. Tokyo speaks a visceral language that, though untranslatable in the words of mainstream fashion, is a poetic tongue.

A jack-of-all-trades, Tokyo is an eclectic rake as well, dashing in a sea of colourful prints and jumbo skirts, cropped jackets and torn tees. The combinations, adhering to no rules whatsoever, are endless, a well of creativity that has made a guessing game out of what style Tokyo will generate next.

"Everything is translated in a different dimension [in Tokyo]," says Antonio Marras, artistic director at seminal Japanese fashion house Kenzo, which celebrated its 40th anniversary last year.

An electric current runs through Tokyo's fashion

scene. Designer Limi Feu, daughter of iconic fashion cultivator Yohji Yamamoto, is an instigator of that energy. Her dark, unstructured looks exude that particularly indefinable quality that symbolises Tokyo style. Her usual palette of black and white was resurrected for spring. Jumpsuits with asymmetrical necklines, fringed trousers and densely pleated frocks paid homage to the mysterious, layered mood of Japanese fashion.

Another common connection of Tokyo fashion is intensity. Legendary designer Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons harnesses that force each season. Her spring show was a fusion of leather and

capacious cotton in moonlit shades. Seemingly sending down creatures of the night, her work palpitated with ferocity, a mix of history, fiction and a forthcoming reality yet to be seen.

"Tokyo is one of the rare places on earth you can feel the past and the future beating together," says Marras. His newest translation of this sartorial aspect took voluminous form with billowy dresses, pants, shirts and skirts cut in chiffon printed with springtime flowers.

Eccentricity, thus, is the keyword. Tokyo is an avalanche of disparate ideas and ideals. This might endanger another city into obscuring its defining characteristic. Tokyo, however, becomes defined by its

helter-skelter looks, an amalgam that identifies itself as a whole. It's a cacophony that works well together. It may seem like Tokyo designers have fallen down the rabbit hole, but in truth, they jumped down intentionally. They are burrowing through to exactly where they want to go.

Because, as Marras explains, "It is the last wonderland where anyone can feel like Alice." ■

KEY LOOKS:

ECCENTRIC MISHMASH OF PRINTS, LAYERS AND LENGTHS



LIMI FEU



COMME DES GARÇONS



KENZO

TOP DESIGNERS