

Ann of Antwerp

Ann Demeulemeester used to be just one of The Antwerp Six, but now she's the biggest star.

PHOTOS BY JEAN-PHILIPPE PIETER

Queen Ann." That was one headline bestowed recently on designer Ann Demeulemeester, whose fall collection provided a rare moment of brilliance in a mostly mundane fall fashion season. Demeulemeester delivered an urbane take on hip that made the Mum-and-Mod preoccupations of other runways seem contrived and dated by comparison. While she's thrived as a cult favorite for years—Ann was one of the now-legendary Antwerp Six—this fall collection may just propel her into fashion's mainstream.

It has already engendered the ultimate compliment: professional jealousy. At least a few prominent designers are rumored to be rolling their eyes and proclaiming Queen Ann nothing more than an upstart pretender within the court of *la mode*, yet another creation of a restless press with a short attention span. (On the other hand, Karl Lagerfeld has cited her as one of the most gifted young talents out there.)

In fact, in person there is something oddly regal about Demeulemeester. Her voice is soft, punctuated with *voilàs* and *ooh-la-las*, but filled with the determination of a woman with an unflinching sense of purpose. Ann focuses simultaneously on her work and her family. Unlike the scores of designers who claim to shun the limelight but revel in the international club scene, she genuinely prefers the sanctuary and sanctity of her home and atelier in Antwerp. And while so many of her peers continent-hop to soak up those of-the-moment vibes fashion is built on, this Queen Mum—she has a nine-year-old son, Victor—would rather stay home.

"I'm not a pop star, if you know what I mean," says Demeulemeester, who's 35 and married to photographer Patrick Robyn. Since 1992 she has shown in Paris, and stays on there for a one-week selling period. "Then that's it, *voilà*!"—and it's back to Antwerp, where the family lives in Belgium's only Le Corbusier house. "It's important to me to be on my own, in my own world, to ask all my questions again to myself," she says. "I'm not some-

body who wants to be in the center of fashion. I put my heart and my soul in my work. When you are a painter, you can paint 10 paintings a year, or 100, it doesn't matter. When you're in fashion, you're required to do a certain amount of designs in a certain period. If you are a perfectionist, it means you have to work day and night to get it exactly how you want it—the quantity is big and the time short. I never want to show something that I don't think, 'OK, I did it the best I could.'"

For fall, her best proved fabulous. The collection projected glamour at its most cool, borrowing from men's wear in a way that was neither staunch nor camp: impeccable jackets, sometimes worn backwards; smoking robes; novel halters that looked like exaggerated neckties. The silhouette was often slim and subtly layered, with a long waist belted at the hips. There were side-wrapped dresses worn backwards, skirts that fell from the hips and luscious sweaters with deep cowls in back. Demeulemeester also showed leathers for the first time and came up with some of the best imaginable, making even floor-length evening pieces look elegant.

"There's a quiet intensity to Ann's clothes, without the outlandish extremes of some designers," says Barbara Weiser, president of Charivari in New York, who knows Demeulemeester's clothes better than anyone. Weiser was the designer's first client back in 1987 and has bought the collection ever since. "Her great talent is the tailoring. The way the clothes feel somehow converts you. You only really understand it when you put them on."

"That's the best compliment—when a woman tells me she loves wearing the clothes," Demeulemeester says. "That's what I'm working for—and only women can understand it. I never show something I haven't tried on myself. It can be very beautiful, but if I don't feel good in it, if I feel ridiculous, I can't put it in the collection. I have a big respect for women, and I don't want to make them look stupid or like dolls, you know?"

Demeulemeester is fanatical on the subject of cut. She claims to come up with completely new shapes every season. This year, spring's more feminine tailoring gave way to fall's men's wear looks, and, she says, "I don't mean only a suit and tie." To facilitate a "slick silhouette that looks like there is a boy inside," Demeulemeester cut the clothes with "very slim hips and no breasts." Such gender plays have always featured prominently in her work. She says she has long been inspired by "the feminine and the masculine within each human being," and that, at a given moment, one or the other may dominate. "If this collection is more masculine than the one before, it's perhaps an energy that I have to get rid of."

Demeulemeester grew up in Flanders, the older of two daughters. "I was always very free as a child," she recalls, "and I knew exactly what I wanted. My parents always believed in me. If I asked to go to art school, they said, 'Yes.' And you know, they would never question or judge. I knew so much what I wanted that they didn't even ask 'Why?' or 'Are you sure?'"

In fact, Ann wasn't completely sure. While she has always had a passion for art, she never gave fashion a thought: "I never made clothes for my dolls." As an art student, however, she loved to draw, especially female nudes. "What inspired me most was to see a naked woman, and that's what led

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The haberdashery pantsuit and halter tie



A corner of the atelier



The atelier's design studio

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me to do clothes," Demeulemeester recalls. "It looked to me as a profession through which I could reach a lot of women. It was not something that was on one wall in one house. For me, making fashion is a communication, like somebody else who writes a book or somebody who makes music. By doing your work, you start a communication with other women. That was the starting point. Not because I was ever fond of fashion."

Demeulemeester's first notoriety came when she and five classmates from the Royal Academy of Fine Art, including Martin Margiela and Dries Van Noten, rented a truck together and headed to London right after graduation to find some business. Not a whole lot of selling went on, but the group became known as The Antwerp Six or "the Belgians," monikers that still linger more than a decade later.

Ann? You bet. Yet Demeulemeester understands it. "You cannot compare one to another just because they come from the same country. But I think because we came out with our first collections at the same moment, and the other thing was that we had incredibly difficult names for the world. *Voilà*. It was far more easy to say 'the Belgians,' rather than 'Ann Demeulemeester' or 'Dries Van Noten' or 'Dirk Bikkembergs.' And nobody had heard of fashion coming out of Belgium, there was no tradition of fashion in Belgium, so nobody was expecting anything out of Belgium."

Since then, The Antwerp Six have moved on personally as well as professionally, and Demeulemeester says she's no longer in touch with any of her former classmates. "Every day you live with these people—for four years—of course you're close. But it's like everybody, you know. So everyone went his own way."

Ann's way was to remain in Antwerp, where she and Patrick bought the 1926 Le Corbusier house in a state of disrepair and began renovation. When they decided to add the atelier, they went to architect Georges Baines, who worked with Le Corbusier. Robyn did the interiors, which includes a Man Ray sculpture made of wooden hangers. "When I'm surrounded by beautiful things, it makes me want to create beautiful things," Ann says.

Editors have been after her for years to photograph both spaces, but the photos here are the first she's permitted—though access to the original house was restricted to Ann's third-floor work space. "I keep the house as private as I can, *voilà*. This is the thing I have to keep for me. I don't need in the press to see my kitchen—no?"

Although the atelier was finished only last year, the company is already outgrowing it and the construction of yet another addition is now underway. But such physical expansion doesn't indicate unchecked growth. "I can double each season, but I don't want to," Demeulemeester says. "I prefer to go slowly to ensure a good delivery, a good organization every time. You cannot fly before you can walk, and I'm a very severe and very careful person."

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That care isn't exclusively self-directed. When Barneys New York wanted to buy the collection for its uptown store, Ann would only sell downtown. "For the moment, in New York, I have Charivari which has the whole collection, so people can find my clothes, no problem. And I have [Henri] Bendel's, which has a more classic choice. I have to respect the people who are there from the start, the original client. That's my own thing."

Demeulemeester attributes her measured approach to her heritage, claiming the Flemish are strict, stalwart, and "you can count on them." If this description is accurate, they no doubt prefer calm over chaos. It's almost impossible to imagine her embroiled in the madness that often pervades other small design houses, especially in the weeks just before a collection. As for pulling pre-show all-nighters, not a chance. Ann's clothes are finished three weeks before each show.

"Of course," she says. "I need these three weeks to prepare the show, prepare the selling and make all the prices. We have to sort out the production, order fabric. It's a lot of organization. When the clothes are ready, it's something, but the organization of everything afterward also takes serious time. It's not that I make just clothes and somebody else does everything, it's a different system."

"The system" includes a tight staff of 14 full-time people and retail accounts that span the globe including, in addition to the New York stores, Neiman Marcus, Blake in Chicago and Theodore in Los Angeles. The clothes are also sold around the world from Ireland to Hong Kong. Ann and Patrick make virtually all major decisions together. The couple has been together for 18 years—since Ann was 16. "We grew up together, we found our place together," she says. "You never have to explain, you just feel. We always follow the same direction. There are just some people that are perfect to be with. You can't explain why it is working—it's like a magnet."

The other major influence on Demeulemeester is her son. Like so many other women, her life is a proverbial juggling act of commitments—and she is deeply committed to both work and hearth. "I am a perfectionist," Ann admits. "It's my best or my worst element."

Of her son, she says, "He keeps me in balance as a woman."

"It's important for a child to understand why his mommy has to work," Demeulemeester says. "It's so important in my life, this work, that it must become normal to my child, too. I always take him with me. I don't know what it is to have a baby sitter. If we can share even a professional moment together, it becomes more normal and it's better for both of us. Otherwise I feel so guilty."

"Perhaps," she continues, "every woman finds her own solution, *voilà*. We women are very demanding, we want both. It's not easy. But women are strong."

As for future growth, this very organized lady draws the line at long-term projections. "I never make future plans, never," Ann says. "It's one of my rules." ●