

WHAT'S NEWS

Belgian Brand Delvaux Makes Its American Debut

'People aren't buying a brand; they're buying a workshop in Belgium.'



IN THE BAG A series of Delvaux's signature Brilliant bags. Delvaux bags, prices upon request, Delvaux New York

By Joshua Levine

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UNTIL LAST YEAR, the south corner of New York's Sherry-Netherland hotel was occupied by a magical gallery, A La Vieille Russie. It had been there since 1961, having arrived by way of Paris and Kiev. On display were the

splendors of Imperial Russia, so that looking through the Fifth Avenue window was like gazing into a Tolstoy novel.

It is no accident that the space's new tenant is a Belgian luxury handbag maker called Delvaux, which opens its first American flagship there this month. History is Delvaux's calling card—down to the location of its stores. That's one of the biggest reasons the company was acquired by Hong Kong–financed First Heritage Brands. Delvaux's Paris store is located at the historic Palais Royal, complete with a century-old staircase from the Lumière brothers' film studio. In London, the label moved into a 1906 building on New Bond Street where a Frenchman named Pinet once sold his shoes.

“I sense the dawning of a time when people need more surprise, more history, more relocalization—the second wave of luxury,” says Jean-Marc Loubier, chief executive of First Heritage Brands. When he came across Delvaux in 2011, it had been telling its story for a long time, but the only people listening were a few Belgians, who accounted for 97 percent of the brand's sales. First Heritage had already bought Robert Clergerie, the French shoemaker. Delvaux came next, and then Sonia Rykiel. Loubier fell for Delvaux's tradition of leatherwork, the fact that it gets credit for the first handbag patent, in 1908, and, not least, its Brillant bag from 1958, which still represents a good portion of its sales. “I am not criticizing fashion, but we are not fashion,” says Loubier, who appointed Christina Zeller as the artistic director. “People aren't buying a brand; they're buying a workshop in Belgium.”

Loubier has even gone so far as to paint the risers on the New York store's staircase black, yellow and red—the colors of the Belgian flag. “Everybody's been to Paris. Everybody's been to Rome. How many have been to Brussels?” says Loubier. Besides, 85 percent of Delvaux's sales now come from international markets. (Loubier will only confirm that total sales are currently over \$116 million.) “You either see the bottle half-full or half-empty,” he says. “Even the jagged edges can be interesting if you know how to use them. Otherwise, do we really need another house proposing to sell you a handbag? Who cares!” delvaux.com.