



# HANDMADE IN BRUGES

Behind the medieval squares and architecture of Bruges lies a lively incubator of young creative talent revitalizing traditional crafts. Journalist Chris Muyres and photographer Caroline Coehorst went exploring to find the new bakers, letter sculptors, weavers and papermakers.



## “It surprised me to see how many kindred souls we have here”

Bruges,\* in northwest Belgium, on any old Friday evening, around sunset: the day-trippers have left the city. Strolling across the square behind the medieval Onze Lieve Vrouwe Church and over the little bridge to the Arentshof, an 18th century townhouse garden, we feel as if we are lost in time.

It could just as easily be 1715 as 2015. Now the whole of Bruges feels like one big, magical open-air museum. You might think that says all there is to say about it: a fun, slightly old-fashioned open-air museum. But nothing could be further from the truth, because behind these historic facades, Bruges is bursting with new creative initiatives. This historic city in West Flanders embraces enthusiastic crafters and artisans who make their own things by hand. Young craftspeople are revitalizing ancient techniques, daring to experiment with them. Turn left a few times where the huddled

masses of tourists turn right, and you'll come across them: the bakers, the letter sculptors, the weavers and papermakers of today's Bruges.

### COOKIE SHOP

With any luck, and the wind blowing in the right direction, you can smell the spicy scent of *speculaas* cookies (Belgian French: *spéculoos*) from even the top of the Halletoren (Hall Tower). Round the corner from the Grote Markt (great market), you'll find the cookie bakery-cum-shop run by Brenda Keirsebilck, Juliette's Artisanale Koekenbakkerij.

Brenda bakes her artisanal cookies with pure and honest craftsmanship, using no artificial additives. Besides traditional Bruges cookies, Brenda is always inventing new variants. “I talk a lot with my clients and swap recipes with everyone. I enjoy that

immensely. That's why I'm not into opening a Juliette's in Antwerp, my hometown. After all, I can only be in one shop at a time.”

What Brenda finds so special about Bruges is that if a cobblestone loosens up somewhere or a road sign gets skewed on its post, they come and fix it at once. “But the municipality and tourism firms don't just want Bruges to freeze in time,” she adds. “On the contrary. So now we have the ‘Handmade in Bruges’ initiative that's bringing together creative people engaged in the crafts—not just traditionally, but in innovative contemporary ways. It's to make us more visible and it surprised me to see how many kindred souls we have here.”

Before Brenda started her shop, she worked in advertising, and traveled a lot for work; she always brought back souvenirs of the spices, fruit, foreign specialties and cookbooks. “My film rolls were full of goodies,” she says. Then, to find some relaxation outside of her stressful job, she took a baking class. “I always liked baking,” she says. “Then I gradually realized that I wanted to do other work that would give me more satisfaction. So when I could take over this bakery, I didn't hesitate.”

When you see Brenda's colorful baked goods, in big glass cookie jars, you can see why she's happy. Above the display cabinet is a row of old cookie tins with pictures of the Belgian royal family. “One day a regular customer, a rather old gentleman, gave me an incredibly beautiful tin with a picture of Belgium's King Baudouin and Queen Fabiola on the lid,” says Brenda. “He told me that it was a farewell gift. And guess what? He'd been the royal couple's chauffeur, and had always come to my place for the cookies he served to his employers. He would never have said anything about it, but now that he was retiring,





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he told me his secret. You can imagine how proud I am of that cookie tin!"

### CARVED IN STONE

Straying from the beaten track to the quiet Sint-Clarastraat, we come to the shop-cum-studio of Maud Bekaert. The remarkably elegant house number is carved in stone. By Maud herself, it seems. As a girl of seventeen, she lost her heart to letter sculpting. During her gap year, between high school and college, she landed in the studio of a letter sculptor who was a friend of her father. The plan was that after that gap year she would study architecture, but after three weeks, she knew this is what she wanted to do.

"Letter sculpting has two sides," Maud says. "You first have to design the text, so that's calligraphy, and then you carve it onto stone, such as for memorials, headstones, house numbers and art for public spaces."

Maud learned calligraphy the medieval tradition: as an apprentice to an expert. Her teacher was Brody Neuenschwander, an American married to a Bruges woman, who works for arthouse-film director Peter Greenaway (his films include *Prospero's Books*). Maud's inspiration comes mainly from the work of contemporary artists, designers and architects, who she can find

in her own own environment: "I like cycling and walking through Bruges, and often go to look at the work of the Flemish Primitives in Het Groeningemuseum. The paintings there are actually quite modern in a way. And I just love the new concert hall that was designed by my favorite Belgian architect, Paul Robbrecht."

According to Maud, you can feel that Bruges has a special vibe. "In the Middle Ages, it was an important trading center," she says. "Back then—it must have been really fascinating—Italians, the Portuguese, Spaniards, and many other nationalities came to trade here. They brought along new textiles and many other new materials, such as paint dyes for artists. It inspired craftsmen to come and work here. That's what appeals to me so, crossing over the boundaries between cultures and techniques. It's just what's happening in Bruges today and it's why I like this town so much."

### WEAVING IN FREEDOM

While Maud's studio exudes serenity, Ilse Acke and her friend Jeffrey Vanhille live in a kind of Flemish Villa Villekulla (the name of fictional character Pippi Longstocking's house). They have offered up the most beautiful rooms of their home to creativity: weaving and furniture upholstery. Their spacious en suite on the ground floor is

1. Brenda Keirsebilck, the most famous cookie baker in Belgium.
2. Maud Bekaert in her studio-cum-shop.
3. One of the gifts in Maud's shop.
4. Ilse Acke with her stock of yarns.
5. One of the rooms in Ilse's home is now her studio.

Jeffrey's workshop, and is crammed full of furniture, rolls of fabric and tools. Two large rooms upstairs have been taken over by two looms and bobbins and spools of yarn in beautiful colors. The shawls that Ilse weaves here are near works of abstract art. Indeed, some of her clients don't even wear their scarves, but hang them on the walls.

"The textile industry has a tremendous history here," Ilse says, "but what I do is so personal that I don't feel it has much to do with Bruges textiles. My work is very graphic, and jumbles lots of colors and materials together. Each time, I try to make something new, that's the challenge of weaving that gives me pleasure. Why would I do something that's already been done?"

Ilse's day job is graphic designer. She's afraid that if she had to make her living from weaving only, she would miss the freedom she has now and that would compromise her quirkiness. "Sometimes I'm ➔➔



“Papermaking is hard work, but fantastic to do. It’s my escape from the hectic pace of daily life”



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2. xxxxxxxxxxxxxx



1. Wooden letters in Piet Moerman's papermaking workshop.  
2. Piet with a pile of cards printed on his own paper.

too tired to weave, but still I need to spend at least a bit of each day in my studio. It relaxes me, I'm completely myself." She likes networking with other solo crafters in Bruges, and also to put her work out there a bit more. "It's nice to show that Bruges is far more than an open-air museum, that new things happen here too. That's how we can inspire others."

The professional weaving course that Ilse took was once on the brink of disappearing, even though it is the only one in the Low Countries. However, her old teachers have told Ilse that new students signed up after seeing her work. "I find it incredible," she says. "You do what you love, and your creativity stirs up something in someone else."

### PASSION FOR PAPER

Not far from Ilse's place is Piet Moerman's studio, on the peaceful Greinschuurstraat. Like Ilse, in his free time Piet works alone on his craft: papermaking. Behind a brick façade is his workshop: a large open space with two mezzanine alcoves. On the ground floor are a few heavy, wrought-iron paper presses and a huge bin filled with paper pulp soaking in water. In the lower alcove there is a desk, a record player with some classic LPs and a bookcase of boxes full of envelopes and handmade cards. Upstairs, hundreds of sheets of paper hang drying.

"Papermaking is hard work," Piet says, "especially putting up all the sheets to dry, but it's fantastic to do, quite relaxing. It's my escape from the hectic pace of daily life." Pete discovered the craft by chance, when he saw someone making paper in the Walloon book town of Redu. It seemed like a good pastime that would challenge his senses. Piet prints designs by Boudens, the Bruges calligraphy family, on his hand-made cards, and later on added designs by Brody Neuenschwander.

"I admire their work enormously," he says. "The cards featuring their designs sell well enough for me to afford my passion. I'm not sure if that could have happened so fast anywhere else. I believe that Bruges has exactly the right climate of craftsmanship and innovation."

### KEEP CALM

Just another morning in Bruges, our last one here. Wandering through town, we pass the traditional yet ultramodern BbyB Chocolates, where Michelin chef Bart Desmidt and master chocolatier Jan Verleye act like a couple of Willie Wonkas, experimenting with chocolate. And we see a hip bike shop that you might come across in New York. Looking for coffee, we end up in a breakfast and lunch place filled with vintage furniture and a "Keep Calm & Eat a

Bagel" poster stuck onto the window. One delicious-looking bagel after the other flies over the counter, inside, served happily by a hard-working young couple. Our musings on all the surprises we've come across in Bruges and all the passionate people we've met here are disturbed by a woman walking in with a big bunch of flowers. She hands the bouquet to the girl behind the counter, saying, "Welcome to the street!" It turns out that this place, called Sanseveria, just opened today. It's happening all the time in Bruges, a town that is constantly becoming much more than an open-air museum. ●

### FIND THE MAKERS HERE

- .....
- Brenda Keirsebilck: Juliette's Artisanale Koekenbakkerij, Wollestraat 31A. Juliettes.be.
  - Maud Bekaert: Sint-Clarastraat 40. Lettersinsteen.be.
  - Ilse Acke: Ilseacke.blogspot.nl.
  - Piet Moerman: Greinschuurstraat 4. Papierschepperij.be.
  - Bagel Salon Sanseveria: Predikherenstraat 11. Sanseveria.be.....