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# MASTER OF LINEN

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RAYMOND LIBEERT

*LEADING HIS FAMILY'S 150-YEAR-OLD LINEN MILL, RAYMOND IS ON A MISSION TO BRING BELGIAN FLAX TO THE MODERN WORLD. WE FOLLOWED HIM INTO THE FIELDS TO LEARN WHY THE PEOPLE'S FIBER IS THE FABRIC OF KINGS.*

BY CLAUDIA BAUER / PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKKEL VANG



Simple, earthy, rustic—how could so humble a cloth as linen be the fabric of kings?

While the likes of Queen Marie-Antoinette and King Henry VII may have been its royal patrons, it turns out that the people who make linen are as salt-of-the-earth and as unassuming as their product. That's why it comes as a bit of a surprise when fifth-generation linen maker Raymond Libeert, an archetypal understated Belgian if ever

there were one, speaks of his intense feelings for linen. "It's a passion. Most of the workers at the factory are from the village, and they have a sister or a brother or a grandfather who worked in the mill. We all share that passion," he says, referring to the weavers and farmers who grow the flax near the company's factory in Meulebeke, a town near the River Lys in the Belgian region of Flanders.

As CEO of Libeco-Lagae, a family business his great-great grandfather founded in 1858, Libeert passionately lives linen every day. For Raymond and his American wife, Amy, who designs Libeco's collections, and their fellow Meulebekers, living with linen means working in harmony with the land, caring for the environment and supporting their community.

Together they uphold a tradition of farm stewardship, natural cultivation and organic production established dozens of generations ago – the Meulebeke area became a capital of linen production in the 12th century. The secret to their world-renowned linen is the moderate climate

nobody makes the world's finest linen without Mother Nature's help. The retting process, for example, during which the silky fibers are freed from the stalks' woody husks, is entirely her doing. The flax farmers simply pull the plants out of the ground, lay them in the field for two or three weeks and let the summer weather work wonders. "You have days that it's raining, days with sun; it's that turn of sun and rain that makes it possible," Libeert explains. Even the water Libeco-Lagae uses during production is recycled: "The water we reject is cleaner than the water we get," Libeert says, a hint of pride sneaking into his voice. "The impact on the environment is really minimal."

Yet the impact of the environment on linen is immense. "There are so many elements from nature that influence the final result. Like in the raw fabric, you can still sometimes see the dirt, the straw...it's really a product from nature, and to me, you can still feel that in the fabric."

When the townspeople convene each day to weave, their goal is to create fabric

*"IN THE RAW FABRIC, YOU CAN STILL SOMETIMES SEE THE DIRT, THE STRAW..."*



and generous rainfall along the North Sea coast, where favorable conditions exist from Caen, France, up to Amsterdam, Holland. These conditions allow the flax to mature in its own time, without irrigation and with minimal soil enhancement, a process that results in the long, smooth fibers that give all Belgian linen its exceptional softness.

It's a level of quality that no other region in the world can duplicate, and one that has earned Libeco-Lagae a royal warrant from the Belgian royal family, in recognition of the company's impeccable quality and the heritage it represents. Libeco has also earned the Masters of Linen designation, awarded only to linen makers that meet the highest standards of craftsmanship.

Now, a company can hold all the warrants and designations in the world, but

that celebrates linen's organic, wholly natural beauty, with as little human intervention as possible. "For much of our production," Libeert says, "we don't use any dyestuff because the natural color of linen is very interesting. I think linen is best when it's as simple as possible." Instead, they put water and sunlight to work on fading and intensifying flax's innate, earthy hues. "Linen has so much character; you have to try to show the character of the fiber as much as you can."

After 30 years spent making the world's finest linen, Libeert's mission is to inspire everyone, not just its royal patrons, to fall in love with its every quirk and quality, from the nubby texture to the relaxed wrinkles. "When I look at the linen, to me it's like a beautiful piece of wood or a beautiful piece of leather. A linen sheet, a linen duvet cover...once it has been



Opposite page: Raymond Libeert, CEO of Libeco-Lagae, in the flax fields; Clockwise, left to right: Image of children wrapped in a Belgian linen throw (photo courtesy of Raymond Libeert) flax fibers direct from the fields; bales of flax ready to ship to Libeco-Lagae's mill.



*"THE WHOLE FAMILY SLEEPS ON LINEN, WEARS LINEN, LIVES LINEN."*

machine washed, just hang it on the line, let it dry and put it as-is on the bed. To me, that is the most beautiful. Because then you see the natural creases of linen."

When asked if linen is a luxury, Libeert demurs. "I don't like to say that linen is a luxury. The word 'luxury' implies that it's almost a little fake. Linen is so much more. To me, linen is elemental, essential."

And what of the upcoming sixth generation – will Libeert's three young children carry on his passion? "They are surrounded by linen from morning till evening!" he says, laughing. "The product we make fits with our philosophy of life." The whole family sleeps on linen, wears linen, lives linen. And as the young Libeerts grow to appreciate its wonders, they'll surely become its next humble, and passionate, stewards.