

interiors





BELGIAN SOUL

INTERIOR DESIGN: ANN-SOPHIE DE STOOP
INTERIOR ARCHITECTURE: BENOIT VIAENE
TEXT AND PHOTOS: JAN VERLINDE





The farmhouse is more than one hundred years old," says Ann-Sophie De Stoop, a Belgian antiques dealer and designer. "It used to be an active farm, with stables, cattle, pigs. When my husband, Charles, and I bought it in 2009 it had been empty for a couple of years and was in bad condition. People told us we were crazy, but we saw its potential. We were looking for a house with outbuildings where we could show pieces, and this was the right place."

Not far from Brussels, set in the quiet Flemish countryside, the farmhouse has been transformed into an elegant country retreat for the couple and their three children. "While we tried to keep the structure's authenticity, it needed a complete restoration to meet modern needs," De Stoop notes. "It would have been easier to tear everything down and rebuild it, but we decided to keep all the original external walls and to essentially build a new house, including foundations, inside it. That explains why the walls are so thick!"







The restoration took two and a half years, and the couple worked with architect Benoit Viaene, an expert at combining historic authenticity with modern comforts. "We both love beautiful, timeless and authentic materials," says De Stoop. "We share the belief that 'Less is beautiful.'"

De Stoop honed her eye from a young age. "Since I was a child, I've been passionate about antiques and houses," she says, "and I studied art history at the universities of Namur and Leuven in Belgium. After my studies I worked for the Asian art dealer Michael Goedhuis in London and had the chance to travel a lot, meet people and visit beautiful houses and art collections. In 1997 I returned to Belgium to work for Christie's, specializing in antique furniture." A few years later De Stoop started to organize viewings at her home, exhibiting and selling objects, furniture, paintings and curiosities she found on her travels. "I presented things integrated and combined with the right atmosphere," she notes. "That was the success of it, I think." She now opens the house twice a year: this spring, May 21 through 25, and again in the fall.

On the first level of De Stoop's farmhouse, floors were lowered to create higher ceilings, and extra windows were added to open the rooms to the landscape. The entrance hall, floored in a matte-gray limestone, is dominated by a sculptural staircase that recalls a Mediterranean-style house in Greece. "We chose to apply the same white-washed wall finish in all the rooms," De Stoop explains. "It imparts a calm, serene atmosphere." An artwork by Hans Op de Beeck accents the spare space.

"I love wood, black iron, marble and Belgian linen, and you'll find these materials throughout the house," says De Stoop. "As we often change pieces of furniture, objects or artworks in the house because I've sold something or because I've found a beautiful new piece, I wanted the house to be a neutral shell. A lot of different styles had to fit into it, without giving a crowded impression."









The living room, with a floor of large oak planks and a beamed ceiling, features an eclectic grouping of furnishings and art. A custom sofa slipcovered in Belgian linen is arranged with vintage Pierre Paulin chairs and an upholstered Louis XIII armchair. The custom bronze coffee table was designed by Benoit Viaene. Above the fireplace, integrated into the wall, is a round textural artwork by Loris Cecchini. The artwork over the sofa is by Kasper Bosmans. De Stoop furnished the simple dining area with a vintage oak table surrounded by antique *os de mouton* dining chairs. On the wall are contemporary artworks by Laurent Da Silva and Leon Vranken. A Provençal chest of drawers holds a lamp made from an Asian jar.

The kitchen features a central island with a walnut base and black marble top that was inspired by an old Italian cupboard. "I wanted to create the impression of a piece that has always been there," says De Stoop. "I love to cook, so I chose a traditional gas stove by Delaubrac. It was always my dream to have Delft white tiles, as well as a fireplace and a large industrial fridge." Wire barstools by Kees Braekman are set around an old refectory table, and the copper pendant light is vintage Danish. The ceramic artwork on the island is by Bela Silva. Between the kitchen and the dining room, a small built-in pantry is lined with black iron-faced cupboards.



The windows in the master bedroom and bathroom are low so we can enjoy the view over the garden," says De Stoop. "Sometimes we're lucky to see a roe deer, which is nice but not so good for our young bushes. A must for me was the gas fireplace, which gives a relaxed and cozy feeling. We light it up almost every evening." A mounted whale vertebrae contributes a sculptural organic note. The master bath features Brazilian marble "that is quite patterned, so we chose a soft pallet of whites and gray for the rest of the decoration."

The outside of the house was left almost untouched, the original brick patina preserved. "We wanted to create a real countryside garden, with a space for chickens and a few sheep, a place for vegetables and for flowers," says De Stoop. "We also have a large covered terrace with a fireplace where we enjoy dinners on long summer nights. And though we love traveling, coming home here is always a joy. We love the fact that nature is so present. It is a haven of peace and a piece of heaven." ■

Ann-Sophie De Stoop +32 475 58 54 10 authenticandso.com
Benoit Viaene +32 093 30 65 56 benoitviaene.be







