

## **Belgian cutlery production after the Second World War**

The Second World War marked a turning point in the silver sector in Belgium. It rallied for a brief period immediately after the war, resulting in increased production and exceptionally high sales figures and the assumption that the silver and cutlery manufacturers would make a complete recovery. However it soon became clear that the reality was very different. Manufacturers and distributors of silver cutlery had to contend with high silver prices and strong competition in the form of cheaper materials, illicit imports of inferior products from Germany and a whole host of new luxury articles including the car and the television. People's lifestyles had also changed: they were no longer prepared to spend their time polishing silver and so chose alternative materials which could simply go in the dishwasher and required no maintenance.

At the 1958 World Fair in Brussels a last-ditch effort was made to convince visitors that silver production was looking up. With a couple of exceptions, like the entry of the Belgian designer Victor Kockerols, however, the entries lacked daring and real innovative form. For various reasons, the modernistic design so typical of the 1950s and 1960s never really got off the ground among Belgian cutlery manufacturers. This is explained partly by the lack of interest and partly by the fact that the new design lent itself less readily to the production of silver cutlery than it did to stainless steel and white metal cutlery.

While Belgium stubbornly stuck to its familiar product range, manufacturers abroad were busy experimenting with new forms, new principles and new materials. Shorter handles, round spoon bowls and shorter knife blades combined with clean lines, simplicity and balance determined the new artistic idiom.

Several cutlery producers including Delheid Frères and Wiskemann NV supplemented their range with a limited number of modernistic cutlery models so as to capitalize on consumer demand. Bruno Wiskemann did not develop a range of his own but entered into an agreement with Gerritsen and van Kempen and thus became the Belgian distributor of one of Holland's most successful cutlery designs. With one exception, Belgian cutlery manufacturers and designers were no longer given to drawing inspiration from foreign trends.

Generally speaking, 1958 to 1990 was a dark period for Belgian cutlery production. The various problems were difficult or impossible to overcome largely because of a lack of flexibility. Apart from Wiskemann NV, not a single manufacturer of silver cutlery survived this prolonged slump.

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