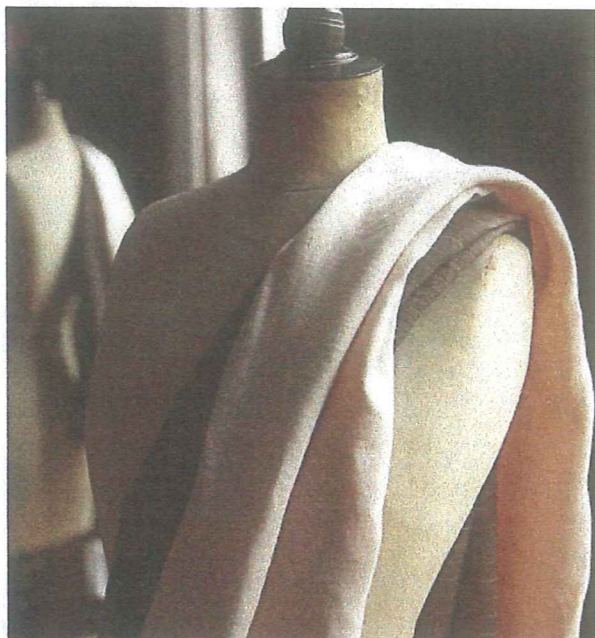


# Raymond Libeert

The CEO of the Belgian high-end linen fabric specialist Libeco, and president of Masters of Linen speaks to Janet Prescott about the challenges and opportunities for the European linen industry, the keys to Libeco's success, and why the interior sector is increasingly important to its growth.

Libeco Lagae is renowned for its linen fabrics used by top designers and international brands, and increasingly for stylish, beautifully finished decor items for the burgeoning ultra-chic interior textiles trade. Its CEO, Raymond Libeert, is an influential figure in the European linen industry, particularly as



he is also the president of Masters of Linen, which prides itself on bringing together the crème de la crème of European linen producers, and has done much for raising the profile of high-quality, innovative products.

Based in the rural Flanders village of Meulebeke, Belgium, Libeco is at the epicentre of the surviving European linen production, now situated in Belgium, France and the outer reaches of Europe. Raymond Libeert is in the happy position of seeing an increase in the interest and appreciation of a fibre which clings to its heritage but has designs on the future. Linen is a fibre involved in high-tech ground-breaking projects, such as automotive developments, and is a paradigm of sustainable, eco-focused production.

## 'A lot of fabric for apparel has been banalised'

Libeco was founded in 1858, and in its modern form it is the result of the merger of two weaving companies founded by the Libeert and Lagae families. Since the merger, the linen trade in Europe has contracted substantially because of economic conditions, new challenges from synthetic fibres and lower cost production in the Far East. However, European linen today is an increasingly valued commodity, reflecting concern for environment, individuality and standards of manufacture.

Raymond is a scion of the Libeert family. A family man, he appreciates the tranquil countryside of Flanders, firmly anchored in the society by historic ties. Although intimately



Diverse linen fabrics from Libeco.





## THE TWIST INTERVIEW

involved in the business, he also relishes travel to key markets. "In the end, there's nothing better than face-to-face contact," he says. Libeco has established a distinct ethos, with mechanisms for staff to be actively involved in suggestions for improvement.

The perils of dealing with a natural product were highlighted this year, when an early drought impacted on linen growth. However, says Libeert, "in the end, everything has more or less turned out normal. There is an increase in price affecting business in general, but in this context linen is generally better than other fibres, for instance cotton. There's a great deal of interest in natural fibres, but also still a lot of uncertainty about the general financial context, such as difficulties with payments from customers and an increase in competition at all levels."

Raymond Libeert has steered Libeco into increasing its involvement in the area of interior textiles. "A lot of fabric for apparel has been banalised," he explains. "There is so much production out of India and China that it's difficult to make a difference. The European apparel weavers occupy a niche market at the very high end, but it's not very easy. In a way there are more opportunities in the decor sector and technical areas and you tend to build a long-term relationship with customers to respond to what they are looking for. But it's not an easy market, and of course it is fractioned into areas which are much smaller than for apparel. You won't get an order for 10-20,000 metres in interiors."

As a result, Libeco is firmly anchored in both areas. "We are always trying to find solutions and there's a lot of interaction between different markets," says Libeert. "Our approach is definitely one of driving the market. It's a very important aspect that you can have international fabric development for apparel for instance, and you realise it might be a fantastic solution for the technical sector or for decor."

Libeco has an international reputation for research and development including product, dyes, finishes and composition. "Customers expect the best quality from us and that usually means pure linen," says Libeert. "But we have wool/cotton blends and have also developed some successful wool/linen blends, a

combination which we've always found very interesting, although technically difficult."

Principal markets are Europe and the US, followed by Australia and Japan, with increasing trade developing with the Nordic countries. Libeco fabric is also shipped to China to be re-exported to Europe and the US after manufacture.

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Raymond Libeert identifies information as a key area for development: "Actually I am flabbergasted that so little is known about linen, even in the village! We keep our fabric customers informed, but it's difficult for them to pass on to the final consumer. Of course it's easier with the finished product to provide information, which we do through booklets and swing tickets."

Libeco's strong eco focus strikes a chord with contemporary thinking. "Long-term it's one of the most important assets we have as a company. We do everything we can for our products to have less impact. Flax has tremendous advantages over most fibres, including natural ones. It is the most ecological fibre, but the consumer is not always aware of the importance of all that."

If top quality linen continues to increase in popularity, how is demand going to be met? Raymond Libeert cites the 2011 drought as an example of how climate could affect production: "In the long run, we might have to look at cultivation further north. Thirty years ago there were more than 1 million hectares of flax grown in Russia and it's definitely a possibility to look at some of that - the same applies to wine, incidentally. There are tremendous possibilities for the future." ●



Libeco fabrics used for interiors.

