



# the Bulletin

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## WHAT'S ON

The definitive guide to entertainment in Brussels and beyond



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Below: the Stone One in cowhide, mosaic and plain finishes

# Wash and don't go

Jean-Pol Piron, founder of Aquamass, tells **Hettie Judah** why he never threw in the towel



**'K**itchens opened up into dining rooms because men and women were living differently," says Jean-Pol Piron. "In 2001 I realised that there was an opening up of domestic space: we were removing the walls in our homes. It seemed to me that next the bathroom was going to start opening up into the bedroom."

Just as Smeg dressed our newly opened kitchens with their retro fridges, and Apple made our home-work spaces funky with candy-colour computers, Piron decided that a market was going to appear for presentable bathtubs. Until 2001, Aquamass was a company dedicated to hydrotherapy tubs. Over the last six years it has become a reference point

for bling bathtubs and sophisticated sanitary fixtures. For a cool €10,000-odd you can have a bath dressed in imitation crocodile skin, camouflage-print cowhide or a bespoke mosaic. Your minimalist home can be dressed to perfection with bathroom pieces apparently pressed out of single sheets of flat white resin that glide down the walls and across the floor.

Piron is fond of telling people that he is not a businessman and that he regards money as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. Having left school at the age of 15, he went into the restaurant business for a decade, then sold up at the age of 25 and took himself off to see the world. In 1977 he arrived in California and encountered the world of the com-

munal tub. "For them it was the Las Vegas of water," he explains. "It wasn't really a health thing or a well-being thing, or something sensual as it was in Europe. It was really social. They sat together in big baths with glasses of orange juice and they chatted. I saw it in the first hotel I went to when I arrived and I couldn't understand what was going on. Then I tried it and thought it was extraordinary. I decided that I should import it into Europe: I thought I'd make a fortune."

Piron ordered tubs to be sent over to Belgium but under the grey Brussels sky, the oranges, greens and browns so fashionable in 1970s California looked revolting. He soon discovered that the electrical motor was not compatible with





## 'It was the Las Vegas of water: I thought it was extraordinary'

European norms and he ended up inventing his own air-and-water massage system that he fitted into ready-made Dutch bathtubs. "The first year we sold eight massage baths, six of them to friends. I lived in Rue Marianne in Uccle, and those eight bathtubs were made in my apartment. We brought them up in the lift and transformed them on the terrace."

The world of sanitary fixtures was a macho enclave – Piron's baths were derided as products for housewives, but he installed a cabin for customers to try the baths in his office "and once they tried, they bought," he says, quite simply. There were 16 good years, and by 2000, Aquamass was getting most of its business from big hotel contracts and Piron was looking forward to an easy cruise through mid life up towards a comfortable retirement. When the hotel and tourism industry went into crisis in 2001, he realised that he either had to sell up or rethink the business.

Bringing designer loveliness to the world of sanitary fixtures is tricky: anyone can make a bath look cool, but you wouldn't necessarily want to use it. "There are two axes in design," explains Piron. "There is pure, hard design which is severe, very blokey, full of cold lines and then there is something rounder, more carnal, more welcoming – it's rather the yin and the yang." The fashion for living spaces may be all about 'pure' design with

its clean modern edges, but this is not a style that co-exists very nicely with the human body in its most intimate moments. "In bathrooms there is nudity, there is skin, there is modesty, so we have to create reassuring forms, and reassuring forms are rounded, and feminine and feel good to the touch."

In pursuing his vision, Piron worked together with young designers like Matali Crasset and Michel Boucquillon, but his most successful tub ended up being one that he designed himself, based on a bath from the Doges' Palace in Venice. "Even the biggest designer rarely invents – they see things and they give their own interpretations," he shrugs. Piron took the ovoid bath shape that had been used since Roman times and refined it down to the point where it looked dangerously fragile, first using stone ("too heavy"), then a miraculous new material called cristalplant. The bath got a name – Stone One – Piron labelled it as the work of one Paolo Chipiron, and it now sells in its hundreds. "It's really my cash machine," he says proudly. The only hiccup being when journalists request interviews with the designer responsible.

Having "both feet firmly planted in my shoes", Piron is also amazed at how much people are prepared to pay for nice bathtubs. "One day I was talking to an interior designer in Paris, and she said 'forget the price of your baths. There is an emotional factor to what you have created. Emotion has no price when you address the target clientele: every minute in the world they sell houses for two, five, fifteen million euros, so stop saying it's expensive – you can't have a vulgar bath in a house that cost €7 million'. But €11,000 for a bath, even if it's very beautiful I find rather...well..." he falters with a smile. Accordingly, this autumn Piron has decided to bring the opportunity for exhibitionist hygiene closer to the mass market with another big ovoid bath, less than half the price of its predecessor but moulded from lightweight plastic and available in bright colours and funky flocked finishes.

Currently 60 percent of Aquamass' trade comes from within Belgium; with the designer sector moving very fast next year it is predicted to be about half, and within three years, Piron is hoping that almost 70 percent of the company's turnover will be from exports. "This is my last challenge, and it's a nice one, it has enormous potential," he says. "I think that the end of my career will be a little easier than things have been for the last few years." ■