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Walter van Beirendonck clothing boutique.

mostly populated by vendors selling Stella Artois to tourists in the shadow of city hall. Less-trafficked visions of historic Antwerp, however, can be experienced in the array of engaging house museums. Their quiet rooms, elegant furniture, and Old Master paintings illustrate how wealthy art patrons and artists lived in centuries past. One of the finest is Rubens House, the regal palazzo and studio of painter Peter Paul Rubens, Antwerp's most famous son. He created the home and its lovely garden in the early 1600s after an eight-year sojourn in Italy.

But to many, Antwerp is now synonymous with edgy clothes, thanks to the so-called Antwerp Six, fashion-school classmates who shook up the 1980s by promoting minimalist apparel in moody colors. Van Noten and Ann Demeulemeester are the most notable of this group of Royal Academy of Fine Arts alumni. It's not all sartorial severity though. Couturier Edouard Vermeulen—he heads the historic Brussels company Natan and dresses high-profile young royals like Mathilde of Belgium and Máxima of the Netherlands—has a ready-to-wear boutique on Schuttershofstraat stocked with alluringly feminine garb. Younger hometown stars include

Veronique Branquinho (her shop is on Nationalestraat) and Raf Simons, a cutting-edge menswear designer who also is creative director of Jil Sander (his clothes are carried at Louis on Lombaardenstraat). If the price tags on the brand-name goods give you pause, there is always the popular resale shop Labels Inc., which does a brisk business in attire by Belgium's finest.

Boutiques offering deluxe fashion, accessories, and jewels—and, of course, delectable Belgian chocolates—are concentrated in ▶



Printing-press artifacts at the Plantin-Moretus Museum.

DIPKUN SAJIC, COURTESY OF THE PLANTIN-MORETUS MUSEUM