

A history of seduction

‘Fashion is a factory that manufactures desire.’

Everything began in Paris. Later we’ll turn to New York and Milan, to London and Tokyo, but most experts agree that fashion, as we know it today, was born in the French capital.

From the days when the couturier Worth designed dresses for Empress Eugénie, the wife of Napoleon III, to the final episode of *Sex and the City* – surely the most fashion-conscious television series of recent times – Paris has been a byword for style. As Bruno Remaury, social anthropologist and lecturer at the Institut Français de la Mode, the leading French fashion school, points out, ‘The very word “fashion” comes from the French: *façon* means to work in a certain manner, and *travaux à façon* is the traditional French term for dressmaking.’

Paris still perspires fashion. On the Right Bank, historically the commercial heart of the city, the fashion zone opens like a jewelled fan from the fulcrum of the Musée de la Mode, housed in a wing of the Louvre. It takes in the glittering boutiques along the Rue du Faubourg Saint Honoré (also home to the French edition of *Vogue*), the über-hip designer outlet Colette, the department stores of Printemps and Galeries Lafayette, and several branches of the hyper-successful retail chains H&M and Zara – not to mention acres of billboard space promoting lingerie, perfume, bags or sunglasses, depending on the season. And this is by no means all: outside that better-known fashion zone, there are

many other significant style hotspots, including the Avenue Montaigne, Saint Germain and Le Marais.

In all of these places you'll find queues in front of fitting rooms and people drooling over window displays, branded handbags slung over their arms. Those who work in the fashion industry will tell you it's in crisis, but on the streets there is little evidence to back up this claim. The activity during the sales season in Paris is like a cross-breed of rugby and boxing, without the nice manners. At the beginning of the 21st century, it's terribly trendy to be fashionable.

The question is – why?

STYLE ADDICTS

Fashion brands employ many techniques to persuade us to part with our hard-earned cash in return for the transient thrill of wearing something new. In our hearts, we know it's all smoke and mirrors – most of us have plenty to wear, and none of it is going to fall apart for a while yet. So why do we keep buying clothes? Can it really all be about marketing?

As fashion scholar Bruno Remaury points out, 'Traditional marketing is based on need. You take a product that corresponds to an existing demand, and attempt to prove that your product is the best in its category. But fashion is based on creating a need where, in reality, there is none. Fashion is a factory that manufactures desire.'

Many of those who work in the fashion business seem surprised – or at least mildly amused – by consumers' willingness to be seduced. Fashion consultant Jean-Jacques Picart, who has worked with brands such as Christian Lacroix and Louis Vuitton, comments as follows: 'For the people who are genuinely obsessed with fashion, it's a sort of drug. This is a personal theory, but I believe it's because they equate exterior change with interior change. They feel that, if they've changed their "look", they've also evolved emotionally.'

He hints that a preoccupation with fashion reveals a level of insecurity. 'The most extreme fashionistas have a vulnerable quality about them. It's as if they are worried about being judged. They live in a state of perpetual anxiety about their appearance.'

With disarming frankness, Picart describes his job as 'a little cynical, a little perverse'. 'The *métier* of fashion has a sole objective: to create brand appeal, in the same way that one might try to create sex appeal.'

Everything we do is designed to make people fall in love with our brand. All the trimmings of our industry – the shows, the advertising, the celebrities, the media coverage – all of these things work together so that, if we've done our job well, somebody will push open the door of a shop.'

It all sounds fiendishly modern. But of course, although the bait has grown in sophistication, fashion branding has been around almost as long as the Venus flytrap.

THE FIRST FASHION BRAND

For our purposes, fashion originated in Paris at the end of the 19th century. That was when the first designer label was created. Although its main market was France, its founder was English.

Charles Frederick Worth changed the rules of the game. Before he came along, dressmakers did not create styles or dictate fashion; they were mere suppliers, who ran up copies of gowns that their wealthy clients had seen in illustrated journals, or admired at society gatherings. The clients themselves chose the fabrics and colours, and dresses were constructed around them, rather like scaffolding. Worth was the first couturier to impose his own taste on women – in effect, he was the prototype celebrity fashion designer.

Worth was born in the town of Bourne, Lincolnshire on 13 October 1826. Like many of today's most flamboyant designers – Galliano, Gaultier, McQueen – he came from a relatively humble background. (Indeed, the desire to escape a humdrum existence via sumptuous dresses and beautiful women is a thread running through the history of fashion.) He was the son of a local solicitor, William Worth, who appears to have run into financial difficulties when Charles was just a boy. Assuming that it was now up to him to put bread on the family table, Charles headed for London, where he became an apprentice and later a bookkeeper at a drapery firm called Swan and Edgar in Piccadilly. It was here that he developed an eye for sumptuous fabrics, and showed the prodigious flair for salesmanship that was to serve him so well. At the age of 20, and by now burning with ambition, he left for Paris.

Worth got a job at the drapery house of Gagelin and Opigez at 83 Rue Richelieu. When he was not busy attending to the needs of his

clients, he designed dresses for his new French bride, Marie Vernet, who also worked in the store. Soon, customers began to notice these elegant creations, which, although adhering to the bottom-heavy style of the day, seemed to have an extra dash of cut and colour. Worth was given a small department at the back of the establishment in which to display his designs. These could be made to measure for customers who admired them.

Gagelin and Opigez were unwilling to let Worth expand his business, so, with the backing of a wealthy young Swedish draper called Otto Bobergh, he branched out on his own. Worth & Bobergh was established at 7 Rue de la Paix in 1858. Although Worth had a number of influential clients, his big break came when he designed a gown for Princess Metternich, wife of the Austrian ambassador to Paris. Empress Eugénie spotted the dress at a ball in the Tuileries Palace, and summoned its designer.

Worth was soon dressing the world's most glamorous women. Unlike his predecessors, he was not a fawning servant, forced to make imitations of gowns his clients had seen elsewhere. As far as he was concerned, he had a better idea of how to enhance their looks than they did. Slowly but surely, he did away with bonnets and crinolines and begun cutting dresses closer to the body. Hoop skirts were replaced by the infinitely more seductive 'sheath' dress – albeit garnished with bustles and trains that required cascades of expensive fabric.

More to the point, Worth was a marketing genius. Previously, dress designs had been displayed on wooden busts. (Scaled-down versions were sewn minutely on to dolls, which were sent out to potential clients as promotional devices.) Worth was the first couturier to sit his clients down and give them a little show – having first dressed a series of attractive young women he called *sosies*, or 'doubles', in his creations – thus inventing the concept of the fashion model. He would also identify fashionable women on whom he could place his dresses, knowing they would create a buzz as they mingled in high society. In private, he contemptuously referred to them as 'jockeys'.

In addition, Worth looked and acted like a proper fashion designer. Dapper and moustachioed, dressed from head to toe in velvet, a beret perched on his head, a cigar between his ostentatiously be-ringed fingers, he would greet clients while reclining on a divan. He had a capricious temper, too – there are reports of him furiously ripping half-finished garments to pieces because they were not exactly as he

had envisaged them. Potential clients could be turned down, existing customers banished.

Here, already, we have many of the ingredients of contemporary fashion marketing: runway shows, celebrity models, elitism, and, of course, a charismatic brand spokesman. Dictatorial and flamboyant, this was a man who rose from obscurity to become deified by the fabulously rich – by the time he died, on 10 March 1885, Worth had established a pattern for all other designers to follow. Certainly, he exhibited a high level of artistry, but of all the dressmakers of that period he was the first to wrap his own name in a fairytale, and resell it at a profit.

POIRET RAISES THE STAKES

The one constant of fashion is constant change. Although Worth left his business in the capable hands of his two sons, Gaston and Jean-Philippe, his brand could not remain at the forefront of style for ever. This is not to say that it didn't have a pretty good run. A stand at the Paris Exposition of 1900 did a roaring trade, and the Worth name continued to resonate up to and beyond the 1920s (with a branded Worth perfume being launched as late as 1925). By then, though, the torch had been passed on not once, but twice.

The young designer Paul Poiret, recruited to Maison Worth by Jean-Philippe, soon began to challenge the restrictive styles of his masters. The son of a fabric merchant, Poiret had started out as an apprentice umbrella maker. In his spare time he had begun using umbrella silk to dress dolls in experimental designs. Poiret wanted to free women from the over-complicated structures that encumbered the upper body. Eventually he would banish the corset altogether, revolutionizing the way women dressed. As François Baudot comments in his (1999) book *Mode Du Siècle*, '[Before then] no fashionable woman would, or could, lace herself into or escape from her carapace without the aid of a second person. They had to wait for Poiret before the appearance of clothes they could put on by themselves.'

As is often the case, Poiret's employers weren't ready to embrace his radical ideas, and in 1904 he opened his own shop in the Rue du Faubourg Saint Honoré. In the years that followed, Poiret altered the outline of women's clothing for good. First came his interpretation of the Empire line: long straight dresses falling from a high waist that

emphasized the bust. Then there was the ‘hobble’ skirt, cut so straight and narrow that its wearer could take only tiny steps (somewhat undermining claims that his clothes ‘liberated’ women). Inspired by fantasies of the Orient and the exotic Ballets Russes, Poiret devised variants of the kimono and baggy harem pants. The latter caused a sensation because, in fashion as in relationships, women were not expected to wear the trousers. Poiret went on to blur the boundaries between art and fashion, recruiting painters such as Georges Lapape and Raoul Dufy to illustrate his catalogues, and decorating his store in a style that prefigured Art Deco.

Like Worth before him, Poiret had a practical yet sophisticated approach to promoting his products. In 1911 he became the first couturier to launch a branded perfume, which he called Rosine after his eldest daughter. Poiret picked out the fragrance and designed the bottle, the packaging and the advertising. That same year, he threw a lavish party called ‘The Thousand and Second Night’, a fancy-dress extravaganza to which guests came as Persian royalty or cohorts of Scheherazade. The designer himself sported a natty gold turban. The most fashionable names in Europe were there, along with selected members of the press.

Poiret opened branded boutiques in major French cities, and organized travelling fashion shows. He designed dresses for the actress Sarah Bernhardt, his very own celebrity muse. Later, when he refused to sell any more dresses to a certain member of the Rothschild family – who had apparently dared to mutter a criticism at one of his shows – he made sure the decision was widely broadcast.

Not all of his marketing efforts were entirely self-serving, however. In that golden year of 1911, he opened an atelier in which Parisian girls ‘from modest backgrounds’ were trained to produce fabrics, rugs, lampshades, and other accessories for the home. These were sold in a boutique and several department stores under the Poiret sub-brand ‘Martine’, this time named after his youngest daughter.

But despite his talent, his marketing prowess and his influence, Poiret could not halt the onward march of fashion. His star was already descending after the First World War, and by the 1920s he was locked in bitter rivalry with the woman who was to become the fashion icon of the era, Gabrielle ‘Coco’ Chanel. According to Guillaume Erner in the book *Victimes de la Mode?* (2004), Poiret referred to Coco as ‘the inventor of misery’. Bumping into Chanel in her black ensemble one

evening, Poiret exclaimed, 'You must be in mourning! But for whom?' Chanel is reputed to have replied, 'For you, my dear.'

Poiret wasn't quite ready to slip away. In 1925, during the Art Deco Exposition, he hired three vast Seine barges. The first he turned into a restaurant, the second a hairdressing salon, and the third a boutique selling his perfumes, accessories and furnishings. It was to be his last extravagance. In the words of Erner, 'While the barges stayed afloat, the business sank.'

CHANEL, DIOR AND BEYOND

Gabrielle Chanel considered that Poiret's dresses were costumes rather than clothes, and a growing number of women seemed to agree with her. 'Eccentricity was dying: I hoped, by the way, that I helped to kill it,' she said, as quoted in the book *L'Allure de Chanel* by Paul Morand (1996). Rubbing salt into the wound, she added that it was easy to attract attention dressed as Scheherazade, but a little black dress showed more class. 'Extravagance kills personality,' she pronounced.

Whatever the truth of these claims, there is no arguing with the fact that Chanel took fashion into the 20th century. But the move had actually been precipitated by social change. During the First World War, women worked in factories and fields, and grew accustomed to the simplicity of uniforms. When it was all over, they were underfed but hardy, and unwilling to slip back into the traditional housewife/goddess role. (Many of them had, in any case, lost husbands and fiancés.) This was also the era of the automobile, which led to a more practical approach: short hair, skirts above the knee and tweed car coats. Women became less overtly feminine. Chanel and others – notably Jean Patou – adopted and embellished the androgynous style.

With her quotable wit and her talent for mixing with the right crowd, Coco fits right in to our alternative history of fashion – one that emphasizes the power of marketing. We certainly shouldn't forget her perfume, simply named No.5 because it was the fifth in a series of samples she had to choose from. It was notable for being the first unabashedly synthetic scent, which contributed to its image of modernity. Even today, according to François Baudot, 'a veritable gold mine, [the scent] continues, in the most condensed form, to propagate the style, the allure

and the resonance of a personality. . . to equal Picasso, Stravinsky or Cocteau’.

While Chanel was busy twisting the fashion writers around her little finger, other designers were demonstrating that they also knew a promotional trick or two. Although her brand did not prove as resistant as that of Chanel (and, let’s face it, few did), Elsa Schiaparelli was a formidable pre-war competitor. Salvador Dali collaborated on her dress designs – notably providing a cheeky lobster print – and the curvaceous bottle containing her perfume, *Shocking*, was supposed to have been modelled on the bust of the actress Mae West. Unfortunately, such publicity coups could not sustain her business through the dark years of the 1940s.

War, of course, changed everything again. Although a number of fashion houses sprang up in occupied Paris, Jacques Fath and Nina Ricci among them, the focus shifted to the United States. Until that time, fashionable American women bought expensive gowns that had been imported from Paris, or had more affordable copies run up closer to home. Even before the war, manufacturers on Seventh Avenue in New York had begun experimenting with synthetic fabrics, faster production techniques and light, interchangeable garments. This development accelerated in the 1940s, and New York became the birthplace of ready-to-wear. By the time peace broke out, the hegemony of Paris as the world’s fashion capital was being challenged. Wartime innovations had shown that ‘chic’ need not mean personal dressmakers or ‘haute couture’. For the first time, fashion was no longer the preserve of the wealthy elite.

Not that Paris had relinquished its importance. The 1950s saw the rise of Christian Dior, a man whose fervour for promotion outstripped even that of his predecessors. As well as being a visionary designer, the inventor of ‘The New Look’ was a moneymaking machine. He launched his first perfume in 1947 and a ready-to-wear store in New York in 1948. By the end of the decade, he had licensed his brand to a range of ties and stockings. He opened branches all over the world, from London to Havana. By the time he died prematurely, in 1957, he was employing over a thousand people – a situation previously unheard of for a couturier. More than anybody before him, Dior realized that luxury could be repackaged as a mass product. Not only that, he considered it the key to the survival and profitability of a brand. As quoted by Erner, he once commented, ‘You know fashion: one day success, the next the

descent into hell,' adding, 'I know lots of recipes, and one day. . . they might come in useful. Dior ham? Dior roast beef? Who knows?'

Perhaps it's no surprise that, today, the Dior brand is owned by the LVMH (Louis-Vuitton Moët Hennessy) empire – the ultimate expression of luxury as big business.

Beyond Dior, the dictatorship of the brand took hold. Even in the 1960s, when fashion was democratized and everyone claimed the right to be stylish, the marketers had the upper hand. When asked who invented the mini-skirt, herself or the French designer André Courrèges, Mary Quant replied generously, 'Neither – it was invented by the street.' Nevertheless, Quant was one of several designers who translated Sixties youth culture into profit, with considerable success.

Another such designer, on an entirely different scale, was Pierre Cardin, a man for whom extending the brand was little short of a crusade. A protégé of Christian Dior, naturally, Cardin noted very early on the decline of haute couture and acknowledged the potential of ready-to-wear (*prêt-à-porter*). He opened one store called Eve and another named Adam. He demanded, and got, a corner of the Parisian department store Printemps reserved exclusively for his brand. A darling of the media, he followed Dior's example by licensing his increasingly marketable identity, and today more than 800 different products around the world bear his name. In her (1999) book *The End of Fashion*, Teri Agins comments, 'There was always a manufacturer somewhere who was ready to slap "Pierre Cardin" on hair dryers, alarm clocks, bidets, and frying pans. "My name is more important than myself," Cardin once said.' Agins goes on to quote Henri Berghauer, who helped to manage Cardin's empire in the 1950s: 'Pierre realized early that he wanted to be more of a label than a designer. He wanted to be Renault.'

Although this strategy generated a vast personal fortune, it also undermined the sense of exclusivity that is the core value of any luxury brand. The Cardin label has languished in the purgatory of the un-hip since the 1990s, and is only now seeing the first glimmer of a resurgence. The future of the brand could depend on whether the designer, aged 82 at the time of writing, succeeds in selling his business – although buyers have apparently balked at the €400 million asking price, according to the French newspaper *Le Monde* ('*L'homme d'affaires chercherait à vendre son empire*', 2 October 2004). The same article suggests that Cardin's licences continue to rake in around €36 million a year. With

that performance, he can afford to dismiss accusations that his brand name is no longer fashionable.

It's impossible to talk about the fashion brands of the 1960s – or indeed the 1970s – without mentioning Yves Saint Laurent. Initially the successor to Dior, Saint Laurent quickly broke away to follow his own path, and it soon transpired that he was able to have his cake and eat it too. He was hailed as a genius of haute couture by the runway-watchers, while at the same time luring shoppers to his 'luxury prêt-à-porter' store, Saint Laurent Rive Gauche, in Paris's Saint Germain district. YSL was keen on licensing, too, but, along with his business partner, Pierre Bergé, he kept a closer eye on quality control than Cardin had done. His biggest hit was a perfume, Opium, which launched in 1978 and remains popular today.

Throughout the 1970s the democratization of fashion continued apace. Art schools pumped out rebellious young designers, rock fell in love with avant-garde clothing, the fashion press exploded and the first generation of 'stylists' – those benign dictators of dress – told consumers what to wear and how to wear it.

In France, the *ancien régime* of haute couture experienced a paroxysm of self-doubt, as prêt-à-porter took the high ground and streetwear usurped aristocratic glamour. The French also faced a new challenge from across the Alps, where the Italian textile and leather merchants began developing their own brands. In *Repères Mode 2003*, a collection of essays published by the Institut Français de la Mode, Ampelio Bucci makes the following note: 'In only 20 years (from 1970 to 1990), [the Italian brands'] notoriety had risen to a global level and they had established a presence in all the principal markets.'

As early as 1965, the Italian leather goods and fur business Fendi was working with a talented young designer called Karl Lagerfeld, who helped to turn the small company into a ravishing brand. And Fendi was not the only Italian player; among the many others were Armani, Gucci, Cerruti, Krizia and Missoni, to name but a few. The London of the 1970s boasted plenty of fresh ideas, associated with names such as Ossie Clark, Anthony Price, Zandra Rhodes and the short-lived concept store Biba, but the real powerhouses of the future were being created in Milan. Until a French tycoon called Bernard Arnault began laying the foundations for LVMH in the 1980s, the Milanese seemed to have the monopoly on luxury as a business. They were traders at heart, and

they knew how to marry art with commerce in a way that many French labels hadn't quite grasped.

THE DEATH OF FASHION

When did fashion stop being fashionable? To paraphrase Hemingway, it happened slowly, and then very quickly. Probably the rot set in around the mid- to late 1980s, provoked by a boom-to-bust economy and the emergence of AIDS as a powerful metaphor for the delayed hangover that followed the 1970s. The effect of the disease was terrifyingly real as it tore through the creative economy, robbing it of some of its brightest emerging stars.

Not that this grim decade was entirely devoid of hope. By now the most interesting thing on the catwalk was definitely in prêt-à-porter, with extraordinary creations from Jean-Paul Gaultier, Thierry Mugler and Kenzo. Elsewhere, Karl Lagerfeld was busy revitalizing Chanel – where he was appointed in 1983 – and Christian Lacroix was showing flamboyant dresses inspired by his passion for opera, folklore and the history of costume. This was, after all, the time of the New Romantic. The period also saw the emergence of the Japanese designers, notably Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo (of *Comme des Garçons*), whose ethereal black numbers combined minimalist rigour with futuristic interpretations of traditional garb. More costume than dress, they served as inspiration for the monochrome severity that characterized the tail end of the 1980s.

More than anything, though, this was the era of the yuppie, the young upwardly mobile professional, whose clothing signified success. 'Power dressing' became a buzz phrase. Giorgio Armani's unstructured but easily identifiable suits were worn as a badge of success. In the UK, while providing flashy City boys with eccentrically reworked interpretations of the tailored suit – his trademark 'classics with a twist' – Paul Smith also discovered the Filofax, a leather-bound 'personal organizer' manufactured by a tiny East End company. By popularizing this combination of address book and diary, which implied that its user had people to see and places to go, Smith handed the yuppies their ultimate accessory.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic, Ralph Lauren had been steadily building one of the ultimate fashion brands. His rag-trade-to-riches story has been told many times before, but it's worth briefly repeating here.

Born Ralph Lifshitz in 1939, America's most upwardly mobile designer was the son of Russian Jewish immigrants from the Bronx. His father was a house painter, who changed the family name to Lauren when young Ralph was still at school. Ralph was brought up on the Hollywood movies of the 40s and 50s, mentally filing away images of Cary Grant and Fred Astaire so that he could recreate their style. He got his start in the fashion business selling suits at Brooks Brothers, and later became a wholesaler of ties and gloves in New York's garment district. Soon he began designing his own ties, choosing the name 'Polo' for its aristocratic associations. The stylish neckwear proved a big hit at Bloomingdale's, and by 1970 Ralph had taken over a corner of the Manhattan department store with an entire range of upmarket apparel.

According to Teri Agins, 'Lauren will go down in fashion history for introducing the concept of "lifestyle merchandising" in department stores. . . Lauren designed [his] outpost to feel like a gentlemen's club, with mahogany panelling and brass fixtures'. She goes on to say that Lauren's stores 'stirred all kinds of longings in people, the dream that the upwardly mobile shared for prestige, wealth and exotic adventure'. But Ralph Lauren is important for another reason. European luxury brands frequently dwell on their 'heritage' for marketing purposes, using a tradition of craftsmanship as a way of seducing consumers and justifying elevated prices (think of Hermès, Louis Vuitton, Dunhill and Asprey). Almost subconsciously, Lauren realized that, in the USA, history was irrelevant. This was the land of Hollywood, of fantasy for sale.

Lauren created a world of aristocratic good taste, but it was pure invention. In the end, his success rested on the quality of his clothes and his knack for branding. Lauren's shops were film sets, and his advertising campaigns – shot by Bruce Weber – were stills from movies that had never been made. It's no surprise to learn that Lauren designed the costumes for the film *The Great Gatsby*. In many ways, Lauren was Jay Gatsby – the man who created himself.

Ralph Lauren was the perfect brand for the 1980s, when fashion became less important than 'lifestyle'. In fact, with the rise of the

supermodel, the media seemed more interested in how the models lived than in the clothes they wore.

Fashion clutched its chest and keeled over some time in the 1990s. In *The End of Fashion*, Teri Agins suggests that women lost interest in fashion because they were more concerned about their careers: '[They] began to behave more like men in adopting their own uniform: skirts and blazers and pantsuits that gave them an authoritative, polished, power look.'

In addition, the Paris catwalks had lost their relevance in the face of MTV culture and streetwear. Levi's, Nike and Gap seemed a lot more connected to quotidian reality than some ethereal vision on a runway. Tracksuit-wearing rappers and the chino-clad super-nerds of the dotcom boom were the new icons; 'casual Friday' elided into the rest of the week. Stores selling comfortable but unchallenging garments, mostly run up on the cheap in Asia, made dressing down not only affordable, but acceptable. The elitist stance once taken by fashion brands began to look stuffy and – horror of horrors – old-fashioned. Clothing became a commodity, spare and functional. Even supermodels began to look less 'super'. Kate Moss, in her first incarnation as a grungy teenager, had nothing of the femme fatale about her. Calvin Klein built a phenomenally successful brand around posters featuring Moss and other androgynous youths sporting baggy jeans and nothing else; it was the 'simple chic' ethic taken to the nth degree.

Finally, many fashion houses were acquired by or grew into vast corporations, selling clothing, accessories, make-up and furniture. As Teri Agins explains, 'Such fashion houses just also happen to be publicly traded companies, which must maintain steady, predictable growth for their shareholders. . . Fashion. . . requires a certain degree of risk-taking and creativity that is impossible to explain to Wall Street.' Further, she observes that the utilitarian blandness of Nineties clothing made marketing more important than ever. Branding played a critical role 'in an era when. . . just about every store in the mall [was] peddling the same styles of clothes'.

Today, while branding remains as crucial as ever, its *raison d'être* has changed. Nine years on from the publication of Agins' book, fashion has – inevitably – transformed itself again. Style has come out of the closet.

THE REBIRTH OF FASHION

The glamour factory had been plotting its resurgence all along, humming away in the background throughout the late 1990s, while industry observers fretted about the rising tide of ‘smart casual’. The next wave of upmarket fashion brands would come from Milan and from Paris; clearly, reports of the death of the French capital had been greatly exaggerated.

There is one name you can’t escape when you attempt to write a history of fashion branding: Tom Ford. As Carine Roitfeld, the editor of French *Vogue* and a one-time collaborator of the American designer, says, ‘In the history of fashion, there’s definitely a pre-Tom Ford and a post-Tom Ford period. He was one of the first contemporary designers who really understood the power of marketing. He was not a snob about his work – he wanted to sell.’

The story of Gucci resembles an opera, replete with glamour, envy and murder. More on that later, but for now it’s enough to say that Ford realized (like all the smartest designers, from Worth to Lauren) that the key to a successful fashion label lay not just in the garments, but in the ‘universe’ surrounding them. Or, as Roitfeld puts it, ‘He created a dream world.’

It was fine that in winter 1995 Ford showed a collection of sexy, sophisticated clothes that attracted the attention of Madonna and Gwyneth Paltrow. Even better that he reintroduced the bamboo-handled bags that had been the making of Gucci back in the 1950s. But he also redesigned every aspect of the brand, from print advertisements to stores, ensuring that everything gelled to create an ‘ideal’ of what the Gucci name meant. According to Guillaume Erner, ‘The Texan turned the style of the brand upside down: previously everything that bore the Gucci name had been brown, soft, and rounded. With him, it became black, hard, and square.’

So what did the Gucci name mean, exactly? It meant sex. Ford brought lust back into fashion with a series of overtly erotic ads that were quickly tagged ‘porno chic’. A famously over-the-top example showed a crouching man gazing at the Gucci logo shaved into a woman’s pubic hair – beautifully photographed, of course. While outwardly deploring the trend, the mainstream media had great fun with fashion’s filthy new image. Sex, as everyone knows, always sells, and many consumers wanted in. Even those who could only afford to buy their jeans from

Gap found some extra cash for a Gucci belt. As Roitfeld observes, '[Ford] created clothes people wanted to wear, and then he explained to them that if they couldn't afford the dress, they could at least buy the sunglasses.'

Ford was not the only one giving the rarefied world of fashion a much-needed kick up the rear. At the same time, Miuccia Prada – with the aid of her husband and business partner Patrizio Bertelli – was blowing the dust off the old family luggage firm in Milan. Prada, too, understood that the brand message had to be carried right through from advertising to clothing to store. Taking the opposite stance to Gucci's sex-drenched imagery, Miuccia positioned her brand as creative, sensitive and politically engaged. New York intellectuals and London businesswomen loved it. The Prada bag replaced the Filofax as the status symbol of choice, and the shoes and clothing quickly followed.

But what was happening in Paris? By the end of the 1990s the city was a shadow of its former self, its image as the world's fashion capital eroded by the slow decline of haute couture and the rapid ascent of Milan, not to mention the dominance of US pop culture and the influence of American designers. As unlikely as it may seem, the resurrection of Paris as the world's most glamorous city can be credited to one ascetic, understated businessman.

Bernard Arnault was already on the rise in 1984, when he acquired Christian Dior. Two decades later, he is president of both Dior and LVMH, with a glittering portfolio of brands that includes Céline, Kenzo, Thomas Pink, Givenchy, Loewe, Fendi, Pucci, Marc Jacobs and Donna Karan – not to mention Louis Vuitton itself. And although the two men have radically different personalities, Arnault's tactics are not dissimilar to those of Tom Ford.

'I met Bernard Arnault in 1985, and he was already nurturing the idea of a luxury brand that would be at the same time relatively accessible,' recalls the fashion marketing consultant Jean-Jacques Picart, who is also Arnault's personal communications adviser. 'Dior now has 310 boutiques around the world, so it can't be described as a luxury brand in the classic sense of the term, which implies exclusive. [Arnault's] stroke of genius was to bring marketing techniques to a world that had previously claimed to have no use for them.'

As far as Dior was concerned, Arnault's most inspired move was the appointment of a charismatic designer named John Galliano. (Legend has it that Arnault made his choice by arranging a meeting of the world's

top fashion journalists, and asking them who they thought was the world's most creative designer.) Galliano didn't arrive at Dior directly: he was first appointed at Givenchy, following the reluctant retirement of the illustrious Hubert de Givenchy. But it seemed as though he was being groomed for Dior all along; when the Italian designer Gianfranco Ferré left the fashion house, Galliano was brought in to replace him. Rebellious Londoner Alexander McQueen then slid into the hot seat at Givenchy, further illustrating Arnault's penchant for shaking up the conservative world of French high fashion, and reaping plenty of media exposure in the process. Arnault would repeat the trick by bringing in hip New York designer Marc Jacobs to revamp Louis Vuitton.

In the opinion of Jean-Jacques Picart, 'One of the things that can enable a fashion brand to stand out is transgression. At the end of the 1990s, when fashion leaned towards the minimalist, John exploded on to the scene with a personal vision inspired by history and costume. It was baroque, excessive, warm, rich, flamboyant, brimming over with decadence and sex. It was also completely at odds with the existing image of Dior. It had the effect of a firework display.'

Gucci, Prada and Dior's formula of young, inventive clothes and affordable accessories, plus aggressive marketing, seemed to reanimate the public's inner fashion victim. Ford and Galliano were personally photogenic and exciting – as entertaining in their own way as rock stars. Fortunately, their makeover of previously moribund brands coincided with the media's increasing obsession with the cult of celebrity and the rise of magazines like *Heat* and *OK!* When the paparazzi captured Victoria Beckham or Jennifer Lopez swathed in designer brands, millions of young women wanted to imitate them.

Of course, as we've already pointed out, few ordinary folk could afford a Prada suit or a Dior dress. Even if they could stretch to a handbag or a pair of sunglasses, where did they get the clothes to match? Enter Zara, H&M and Topshop – high-street brands employing talented young designers who produced fun, fresh creations that wouldn't look out of place on the Paris runways, and were sometimes directly inspired by them. (See Chapter 3: When haute couture meets high street.) By the end of the millennium, fashion was glamorous again.

SURVIVING THE CRASH

In their latest incarnation as dream merchants, fashion brands seem curiously resilient. In September 2001, a minor war had been pre-occupying industry-watchers for several months. The conflict ranged Bernard Arnault against another French businessman, François Pinault, owner of the retail and mail-order conglomerate Pinault-Printemps-Redoute (PPR). The disputed territory was Gucci.

Arnault had been stealthily buying shares in Gucci with the intention of taking over the company. By 1999 his stake had reached 34 per cent. But neither Tom Ford nor Gucci CEO Domenico De Sole liked the idea of being swallowed up by LVMH, where they suspected they would lose control of the brand. Their white knight arrived in the form of François Pinault, who snapped up 40 per cent of Gucci's shares. He also acquired beauty and cosmetics company Sanofi, which owned Yves Saint Laurent. In a couple of swift moves, Pinault had created Gucci Group, a potential rival to LVMH.

The flurry of acquisitions that followed on both sides looked like a duel between billionaires – Monopoly played for real. As LVMH continued its rapid expansion, the Gucci Group took possession of Boucheron, Bottega Veneta and Balenciaga, and signed partnership deals with Alexander McQueen (who left LVMH's Givenchy amid considerable tongue-wagging) and Stella McCartney. Meanwhile, the bitter dispute over who had the right to take control of Gucci was tied up in court in the Netherlands, where Gucci's shares were listed.

Finally, in the economic dip provoked by the dotcom crash – and almost as if he sensed that he needed to conserve his resources for the difficult period ahead – Arnault gave up the fight. On 10 September 2001, he sold his Gucci shares, allowing his arch-rival François Pinault to take full ownership of the company. The *guerre du luxe*, as the French press had termed the conflict, was over.

We all know what happened the next day. In New York, the fashion carnival was in town for the spring-summer collections. The huge marquees that would be the setting for many of the shows had been erected in Bryant Park, practically within view of the Twin Towers. The industry was therefore witness to the horror that was to cause its latest nervous breakdown.

It seems almost churlish to try to place an event as tragic and far-reaching as 11 September 2001 within the context of fashion. But the

interesting fact is that, after a dramatic slump, the industry emerged from the disaster in rather better shape than anyone had a right to expect.

On 19 December 2001, an article in *The Independent* reported, 'Profits fall by half at Gucci and Italian fashion giant predicts no upturn until late 2002'. Fast-forward to 16 October 2003, and a headline in *The Guardian*: 'Fashion back in fashion as Gucci sales surge'. Later (23 January 2004), again in *The Independent*: 'LVMH's luxury defies the downturn'. In *Time* magazine's autumn 2004 Style and Design supplement, an article headlined 'Luxury Fever' commented, 'Despite rising interest rates, staggering energy prices. . . and the general state of unrest in the world, conspicuous consumption is back.'

And it's not just the luxury brands that have weathered the storm. In December 2003, market researcher Mintel pointed out that high-street fashion brands H&M, Zara and Mango had all managed to double their sales between 1998 and the end of 2002, despite slowing growth. At the time of writing, the 'fast fashion' brigade continued to announce healthy sales increases and new store openings.

Such is the magnetism of fashion. We need to take a break from it occasionally, but sooner or later we come back for more. And if they've been smart enough, our favourite brands are waiting for us.

Fashioning an identity

‘In a lot of ways, branding is simply telling a story.’

Exploring the fashion world occasionally feels like gate-crashing an exclusive club. At least, that’s the sensation I experience as I climb a spiral staircase in a building near Place Vendôme – the grand Parisian square that is home to the Ritz. César Ritz opened his celebrated hotel on 1 June 1898, and its rich patrons attracted the attentions of Cartier, Boucheron, Van Cleef & Arpels, and the other jewellery and luxury goods boutiques that crowd the square.

This particular building is the headquarters of a publishing firm, but its location is entirely appropriate. Over the past ten years, Assouline has published a series of glossy books, each minutely dissecting the history of a legendary designer label. With offices in Paris, London and New York, it has become a luxury brand in its own right. I reckon that here, at least, I should get my first insight into what makes a fashion icon.

As so often on these occasions, the claustrophobic staircase and labyrinthine corridors of the old building lead to a large office, with a bright picture window overlooking the potted trees and shrubs in the courtyard. Martine Assouline, an elegant French woman, sits me down at a glossy slab-like table and considers her response to my question.

‘At the moment we are in a period where the brand has an exaggerated importance,’ she tells me. ‘Designers like Tom Ford, John Galliano and

Marc Jacobs injected new life into fashion. They fused it with the music and film industries in a manner that seemed very new, very attractive. This was not always the case – in the era of the supermodel, nobody really cared about brands. Naomi Campbell and Claudia Schiffer were the brands; the clothes were immaterial. But fashion has come down to earth – it appears more accessible, more affordable, even when this is not the case. People identify with Prada, Dior and Louis Vuitton in a way that they never did before.’

But do these brands have anything in common? What’s the uniting factor that has enabled them to succeed and survive?

‘It’s a heritage that makes customers daydream, and the strength to live up to it. The question of succession is important: Chanel was lucky to have appointed Karl Lagerfeld, just as Dior was resuscitated by the arrival of Galliano. The wrong designer can wreck a brand. It is also vital to achieve the correct balance between marketing and creativity. I don’t think it is fair to say that fashion is based entirely on marketing. You can do as much marketing as you like, but if the final product does not deliver, the brand loses its power. Pierre Cardin made millions licensing his name, but the products were not always of an acceptable quality. And so. . .’ She shrugs.

A few days later, in the rather different setting of a shabby-chic café called *Chez Prune* near the Canal Saint Martin, I’m sipping coffee with a trend-tracker called Genevieve Flaven, co-founder of *Style-Vision*, a company that specializes in monitoring and predicting consumer behaviour (see Chapter 6: Anatomy of a trend). Like Martine Assouline, Flaven believes that few consumers are convinced by marketing alone.

‘Every consumer can now decrypt advertising messages, so traditional marketing has become less and less significant. Consumers want to know what’s behind the brand – what it can give back to them. Sometimes it’s just a question of value: the best quality for the price. When people buy a very high-priced garment, they want to see the patience and the craftsmanship that has gone into it. They are paying to possess a beautiful object. And sometimes, when it’s a famous brand, they are paying to be part of the story.’

Flaven explains that iconic brands create – and occasionally rewrite – their own narratives.

‘It resembles a novel that you, the consumer, can enter. Chanel is a good example. First, through her talent and the power of her personality, Coco created her own myth. And now the legend of Coco is

inexhaustible. It's the thread that pulls us into the Chanel universe. Every time Chanel launches a new product, it emphasizes a link with Coco, urging us to own a little piece of the legend. When the jewellery range was launched [in 1993] we were told it was in the spirit of Coco – but in fact she disliked jewellery. In a lot of ways, branding is simply telling a story.'

Few people can create a myth from scratch, which is why many fashion entrepreneurs have chosen to buy in to existing stories. (See Chapter 14: Retro brands retooled.) Take Lambretta, for instance. Like the Italian scooters themselves, the name has plenty of retro buzz: Mods and Rockers battling on Brighton beach, natty suits, sharp haircuts and Cool Britannia all rolled into one youth-friendly package. The scooter launched by Ferdinando Innocenti in Lambrette, Milan in 1947 had long been out of production by the time a UK licensing company acquired the name. In 1997, Lambretta re-launched as a British menswear label with a flagship store in London's Carnaby Street – Swinging Sixties Central. Playing on Lambretta's connection with British Mod culture, the store contained a scooter, a Union Jack-patterned sofa and a range of sleek but street-smart clothing. Womenswear followed in 1999, two more stores opened; by 2003 the brand could claim 'ongoing approval from celebrity wearers in the worlds of film, music and TV, including members of Stereophonics and Groove Armada, Ewan McGregor and Vernon Kay' (*Cool Brand Leaders*, 2003). The clothes, the store design and the advertising skilfully edited the Lambretta story, downplaying the brand's Italian heritage and favouring its role in British popular culture.

Other brands have even more unlikely roots. How to explain the success of CAT, the US-based footwear company that is an offshoot of Caterpillar, maker of lumbering earth-moving vehicles? In fact, the evolution makes perfect sense. CAT boots were originally launched in 1991 as protective footwear for Caterpillar machinery operators. (The Caterpillar brand dates back to 1925, when two tractor makers merged to form Caterpillar Tractor Co, based in California. The name Caterpillar derives, of course, from the 'crawler and track' mechanism that allows the vehicles to traverse rugged terrain.) Licensing companies in the United Kingdom and the United States spotted the potential of the brand's early designs, especially the honey-yellow Colorado work boot, which gelled perfectly with the mid-Nineties 'grunge' aesthetic of plaid shirts and cargo pants. Today, a US-based company, Wolverine

World Wide, holds the global licence for CAT Footwear. Since 1994, it has sold nearly 50 million pairs of CAT shoes.

‘The fashion aspect of the brand is more pronounced in Europe,’ says Shannon Jaquith, brand communications and international marketing manager. ‘In the US we’re predominantly a work boot business, which makes sense given our heavy machinery heritage. In Central and South America we provide non-slip footwear for people who work in the shipping industry – and there’s a connection because Caterpillar makes marine engines. We didn’t set out to become a fashion brand, which ironically helped us develop into one.’

Jaquith says the brand’s values remain consistent across all its markets. ‘We’re gritty, blue-collar and authentic. People like us because we haven’t tried to portray ourselves as trendy. Our brand image begins with our work shoes – we’re here to protect you. In a world where there are a lot of greedy brands clamouring for a slice of the fashion market, we strike consumers as grass-roots and honest. For instance, when we came out with a vintage collection, it really dated back to the 1920s – it was based on our original designs.’

CAT positions itself as a genuine American icon alongside brands such as Budweiser, Levi’s and Harley Davidson. A typical extract from one of its catalogues tells the story thus: ‘Whether it’s a builder swinging a hammer, a musician strumming a guitar, or a student studying from his local café. . . the toughness, honesty and uncompromising nature of CAT is a badge that represents their preference for cargos over khakis, the warehouse loft over a metro high-rise, and their local garage band over the hottest new dance club.’ It is a perfect piece of branding narrative, together with the slogan ‘No guff since 1904’. This tinkers slightly with historical fact, as the date refers to one of the two tractor firms that later merged to create Caterpillar. However, the core brand ‘promise’ is genuine, because CAT continues to provide robust protective footwear across a number of industries.

‘We don’t have a huge marketing budget, so our main focus right now is in enhancing our retail presence; communicating the lifestyle of the brand at store level,’ says Jaquith. Thus, heavy machinery becomes the perfect backdrop for a fashionable brand extension. The message is clear: the more convincing the story, the more attractive the brand.

CONTROLLING THE PLOT

But if consumers are invited to play a part in the story of a brand, what happens when they subvert it? Throughout the history of fashion, consumers have had an irritating habit of sweeping aside carefully constructed marketing strategies and bending brands to their own will. It is doubtful, for example, that Dr. Martens encouraged the skinhead movement to adopt its shiny black boots. To its credit, however, the brand does not try to bury the association. Its website has its own explanation: according to its narrative, the original skinhead was a ‘multicultural, politically broad-minded and fashion-conscious individual’ with a liking for ‘reggae, soul and ska’. It was only later that the look was ‘hijacked by right-wing racists’.

Burberry faces a similar problem in the United Kingdom. Some time ago, it joined the pantheon of brands adopted by label-conscious but not particularly upmarket British youth, notably soccer fans. As a direct corollary, and most damagingly of all, Burberry – and particularly its iconic check pattern – has become associated with ‘chavs’. The etymology of the term ‘chav’ is unclear – theories range from the Romany word for ‘child’ to the straightforward acronym of ‘Council Housed and Violent’ – but it has been widely adopted by the British media to describe a certain type of downmarket consumer. Chavscum.co.uk, the website that first identified the group, uses the definition ‘Britain’s peasant underclass’. In the section of the site headed ‘How to spot a chav’, the first item is a baseball cap in Burberry check. The plaid fabric has become so closely associated with hooliganism that some pubs and clubs have instructed door staff to refuse entry to young people wearing it. An article in *The Guardian* (‘The two faces of Burberry’, 15 April 2004) cites a picture of a soap opera actress ‘clad top to toe in Burberry check: the hat, the skirt, the scarf, her baby dressed up to match’ as the moment when Burberry became ‘the ultimate symbol of nouveau riche naff’.

The ‘chav’ association clearly goes against the grain of Burberry’s status as a luxury brand. It also threatens to unravel the work Rose Marie Bravo has done to rebuild the label since joining the company as chief executive in 1997. Making the brand younger and more accessible has left it open to re-interpretation.

And yet Burberry has emerged relatively unscathed. For a start, ‘chavs’ are a purely British tribe, and the UK market accounts for

only 15 per cent of the brand's sales. In Europe and Asia, Burberry has successfully maintained its official positioning as English, quirky and fashionable – a 'classic with a twist', à la Paul Smith. It has also toned down the trademark plaid, now using it on only five per cent of its clothing, as opposed to 20 per cent a couple of years ago. Bravo told *The Guardian*, 'We had this issue of logoism that was rampant across the industry. But we knew that these things run in cycles, you can have too much of a good thing. We moved on, and we got into a mode of being more discreet with the logo.' The company has also placed more focus on its check-free upmarket label, Burberry Prorsum, which is a step above the largest range, Burberry London, in both positioning and price. The current face of Burberry Prorsum is the aristocratic English model Stella Tennant.

Burberry's non-executive director, Philip Bowman (the chief executive of Allied Domecq), skilfully handled the potentially difficult issue by at first laughing it off – brandishing a copy of a book about chav culture during a press conference – and then suggesting that most of the Burberry items worn by the clan were fakes. He told the world, 'I think the genesis of it is rather sad. In this country there is not an insignificant amount of counterfeit product at the low end' ('Bowman keeps the chavs in check', *Financial Times*, 22 October 2004).

In short, Burberry has trodden a delicate line between nonchalant acceptance and ingenuous denial of the phenomenon. In any case, the chavs have done little to undermine the company's performance. At the time of writing, it had just announced a year-on-year sales rise of 14 per cent.

Lacoste has faced the same challenge in its native France, where the prestigious sportswear with the crocodile logo has been adopted as a uniform by tough teenagers from the *banlieues*, or suburbs.

In 1925 tennis ace René Lacoste was standing in front of a shop window in Boston with Pierre Guillou, captain of the French tennis team, shortly before a vital qualifying match for the Davis Cup. 'If I win,' Lacoste said, indicating a crocodile-skin suitcase, 'you can buy me one of those.' He lost the match, but an American journalist who had heard about the bet reported that 'the young Lacoste [did not win] his crocodile-skin suitcase, but he fought like a real crocodile'. From then on, Lacoste wore a crocodile embroidered on the breast pocket of his shirts. And when he launched a range of sportswear in 1930, it naturally bore the crocodile logo. Today, more than 30 million Lacoste

products are sold annually in over 110 countries, generating revenue in excess of €800 million.

With its emphasis on quality and its roots in the exclusive domain of tennis, Lacoste had all the ingredients it needed to seduce upmarket consumers – and it did so, for decades. But when French hip-hop fans began casting around for a home-grown version of the sports brands worn by their American counterparts, they naturally turned to Lacoste. The logo implied performance, taste, and money to burn. Plus, what could be more rebellious than that snappy little croc?

At first, Lacoste observed this turn of events with grave concern, fearing that it would lose its traditional older, wealthier French client base. Soon, though, it recognized an opportunity – one that, after a false start, it utilized with considerable subtlety. While a blatant attempt to target these new consumers might have succeeded in distancing both loyal customers and suburban kids – whose very fascination for the brand lay in the fact that they had ‘hijacked’ it – Lacoste adopted an oblique approach. It used the trend as a springboard to rejuvenate the brand. It hired a new designer, Christophe Lemaire (formerly of Thierry Mugler and Christian Lacroix), who introduced a range of ‘elegantly functional’ clothing: ‘Though Lemaire was not allowed to touch the polo shirt – the company still regards it as a perfect classic – he used it as a reference point for his collection of sharp pullovers, hip track jackets, soft pants and sexy pleated skirts.’ (‘Courtoisie on the court’, *Newsweek*, 27 May 2002.) Lacoste showed on the catwalks in New York and Paris, and opened smartly minimalist concept stores in France, the United States, Germany and Japan. Cult film director Wong Kar Wai was brought in to direct a globally-screened commercial in the languorous style of his movie *In the Mood for Love*, raising the brand’s profile among culturally savvy consumers while simultaneously catering to the important Asian market. Even the crocodile logo was given a subtle retouching by the design agency Seenk, becoming simpler and more streamlined.

Bernard Lacoste, company chairman and the founder’s oldest son, refers to the strategy as ‘evolution rather than revolution’. The brand regained control of its identity, while giving a ‘*merci*’ nod to the influential group that had helped perk up its flagging relevance. As one French lifestyle magazine noted, ‘In the past regarded as little more than vandals, the “crew” from the high-rise blocks have become sought-after opinion leaders, whose cultural and stylistic codes are scrutinized

by trend-trackers. In short, they are the people who define tomorrow's fashions.' (*Comment Lacoste a rendu accros les ados de banlieue*, *Technikart*, 28 May 2002.)

It's certainly not the last time a luxury brand will be forced to tackle the issue of over-accessibility: at the time of writing, there are reports that Dior intends to drop some of its lower-priced accessories, such as the bracelets sported by teenage girls from the Paris *banlieues*, in order to re-establish its exclusivity. A myth is a fragile entity, easily tarnished.

THE ITALIAN CONNECTION

The connection between Dr. Martens, Burberry, Lacoste and Dior is that they have a lengthy heritage to rely on. They may choose to highlight or mask different aspects of their past depending on prevailing trends, but the elements are readily available – a pick-and-mix bag of anecdotes and attributes. But what if you're starting from zero, without access to a resonant name, a dusty archive, or a famous designer? How do you give your brand a compelling story?

There are two instructive – and very different – examples from Italy. The first is Tod's, the footwear and accessories brand. There is no Signor Tod, and there never has been. When company chairman Diego Della Valle created the brand in 1979, he invented the name JP Tod's to give his ultra-comfortable loafers an air of Anglo-Saxon classicism. But his real stroke of genius was an advertising campaign featuring black and white photographs of Cary Grant, Jackie and John F. Kennedy, Audrey Hepburn and David Niven, with a single Tod's loafer superimposed at the bottom of the image. Della Valle was not claiming that these people had actually worn his shoes – let's be clear – he was simply linking the brand with a certain insouciant style. Add a high price point to underscore a suggestion of luxury, and the legend falls smoothly into place.

The second example is perhaps even more impressive. It concerns a young man from rural Italy who ran up a pair of jeans on his mother's sewing machine, and went on to build a global brand.

On the day I went to meet that young man, we were barrelling down the *autostrada* in a functional four-by-four, when my driver pointed out a gleaming flame-red car. 'Look at that – a Ferrari,' he said. 'Now that's

what I call a car. *Che bella!*' He looked on with envy as the Ferrari roared to a pinpoint in the distance.

Diesel founder Renzo Rosso wouldn't be quite so impressed. He's more of a Harley Davidson, rock and roll sort of guy. He likes things beaten-up, frayed and oil-stained, preferably mixed in with a bit of retro kitsch. The Diesel universe frequently resembles a 1950s sci-fi movie, sometimes the attic of a junk shop, occasionally an *Easy Rider* psychedelic road trip, and very often a blend of all three. Mostly, it looks like the contents of Rosso's own head.

'I bought a sports car once, when I was younger,' confesses Rosso later, over lunch in the small town of Molvena, where Diesel is based. 'It was a Dodge Viper. I drove it maybe twice. The second time I was sitting at the traffic lights and I became aware of the fact that everyone was looking at me. I didn't like that feeling. I sold the car not long after that.'

Rosso has come a long way from his parents' farm – but, in a sense, he is still in the same place. Diesel's surprisingly small light industrial unit is tucked within the folds of the hilly Bassano del Grappa region in northern Italy, not far from where he grew up. He remains close to his native soil, with the major difference that he now has his own farm, as well as a vineyard producing the red wine that we are currently sipping.

'I have some luxuries,' he says, 'a beautiful home; but I'm still the same person. Basically, I'm a meddler. When I was a kid, I used to take my moped apart and put it back together again, to see if I could get it to go faster. I've always been like that. I look at things and try to work out how they could be better, more fun, more amusing. I'm allergic to the ordinary.'

Rosso ran up his first pair of jeans at the age of 15, on his mother's Singer sewing machine, because he couldn't afford a pair of the flares that were fashionable at the time. 'A couple of my friends liked them, and asked me to make some for them too. Every night I sat at home stitching jeans for my friends. But it was okay, because I charged them 3,400 lire – about two euros. I said to myself, "You know; there might be a future in this business."'

This insight led him to the local technical college in Padua, where he studied textiles and manufacturing. Afterwards, he got a job as a production manager at a company called Moltex, which made trousers for various Italian labels. The enterprise was run by Adriano Goldschmied,

who became Rosso's mentor. Rosso is quick to acknowledge, 'He taught me how to survive in the fashion industry.'

A couple of years later, in 1978, Rosso approached Goldschmied with the idea of starting his own jeans label. 'So we went into business together, producing jeans for ourselves instead of other people.' It was Goldschmied who came up with the brand name Diesel. 'We wanted something that didn't sound Italian; that had an international feel. Did you know the word is pronounced the same all over the world?'

The business developed slowly. By his own admission, Rosso was young, inexperienced, and unwilling to risk the future of the joint-owned enterprise by trying some of the wilder ideas that lurked in the back of his mind. Then, in 1985, he bought Goldschmied's half of Diesel: 'That was when I started producing things that were a little more personal, a little more crazy. Everything I did was inspired by vintage. Now everyone uses that word, "vintage", but we were the first to do that. When I began producing stonewashed jeans and jeans with holes in them, retailers would send them back, saying the quality was not good enough. I was obliged to travel – to New York, to Stockholm, to Los Angeles – to explain the concept. It's hard to imagine today, but 25 years ago department stores weren't stocking a great deal of casual-wear, particularly in the States. It was rows and rows of suits. Imagine trying to convince them to stock jeans that already looked old.'

In addition, Rosso had set his prices high. 'Because of the production process that had gone into ageing the jeans, I was selling them for 80 or 90 dollars, when the average at the time was about 50 dollars. I remember going into a vintage store called Antique Boutique in New York, which I thought our jeans suited very well. The guy said no, but I told him, "Don't say no! I believe in this thing! Give me one metre of space, and if you don't sell them all, I'll buy the rest back."'

Needless to say, he didn't end up empty-handed. 'The reason this company has succeeded is because we're always trying to be different. We stand out from the crowd. For instance, in 1995 we started doing accessories. We produced a really strange pair of sunglasses [the cult 'Sister Yes' model] when there was absolutely no innovation in that market. Then we turned to wrist-watches, and gave them the Diesel treatment too. We've changed many aspects of fashion, although few people would give us credit for it.'

It's impossible to talk about Diesel's idiosyncratic style without turning to Wilbert Das, the brand's creative director and head of design.

The Dutchman joined the firm in 1988, straight out of art school, having hassled Rosso for a job. 'I'd seen his clothes in small boutiques in Holland, and I could tell right away that what he was doing fit in with my ideas. Everyone had big catwalk dreams, but I wanted to design clothes that I would see on the streets. That's where the really innovative stuff in fashion was happening – and it still is.'

Das joined the company as assistant designer on the men's line, gradually working his way up the ranks to the top slot. These days he's as essential to the Diesel image as Rosso himself, enjoying an almost symbiotic relationship with the founder of the brand. So how does he define the Diesel identity?

'We've always been fascinated by things that are kitsch, colourful, decorative. Sometimes we refer to it as "retro-futuristic", but that doesn't quite capture it. We like to clash styles, piling references on top of one another. We go out of our way to challenge definitions of good taste. We're not interested in fashion – we prefer to create things that are entirely our own. Diesel is anti-fashion fashion.'

Rather than attending catwalk shows, disembowelling glossy magazines or hooking themselves up to the internet, Diesel's designers travel to urban hotspots around the world. They return with posters, postcards, CDs, club flyers – and, of course, second-hand clothes. Diesel's design studios are cluttered with racks of unlikely vintage items in lurid colours, migraine-inducing patterns and crackly fabrics; all of which might resurface in a mutated form as part of a Diesel collection.

'We have a lot of freedom because we design our clothes on an item-by-item basis, rather than by co-ordinated "looks". We've always considered our consumers to be intelligent, not brand junkies who go to a single store for an entire outfit. We expect them to mix us with other brands, with vintage clothes, with anything they like. These are people who expect a lot of choice. For that same reason, we offer them a huge range of jeans: something like 45 styles and 67 different washes in each collection. Multiply that by lengths and waist sizes and you can see that it gets quite insane.'

Insanity, or at least eccentricity, doesn't seem to be a disadvantage at Diesel. The company traffics in irony, a rare commodity in the fashion world. This is evident in its widely acclaimed advertising, which has played a crucial role in establishing the brand's notoriety. Although Diesel employs an advertising agency, which is unusual for

a fashion brand (see Chapter 7: The image-makers), Das oversees the creation of all marketing materials: ‘This is vital, because we look upon communications as one of our products. The same standards that we apply to our clothes, we apply to our external communications.’

Diesel’s decision to embark on an international advertising campaign in 1991 was a turning point in its history. Its first agency was a small Stockholm-based outfit called Paradiset. The relationship lasted until 2001, by which time Paradiset had racked up shelf-loads of advertising-industry awards and Diesel had exploded into a global brand.

‘Our distributor in Sweden recommended the agency to us. It was tiny, maybe four or five people,’ Das recalls. ‘As soon as we met them, we loved what they were doing. In our sector there are not many people who are brave enough to try different things. And in the advertising industry as well, people are not very courageous. But Paradiset really had balls.’

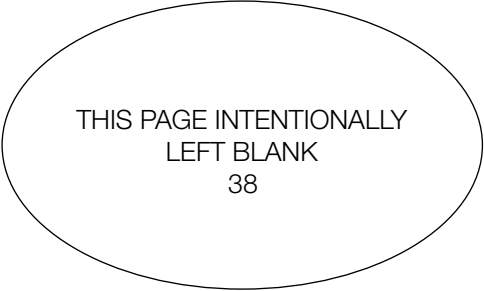
Paradiset came up with the slogan ‘Diesel: For Successful Living’, which referred to the improbable advertising promises of the past, while utilizing the company’s trademark irony. Print ads resembled the centrefolds of ancient porn magazines, Bollywood movie posters, army recruitment campaigns, ads for superannuated domestic appliances – anything but fashion spreads, in fact.

Renzo Rosso says, ‘Once again, we broke through by doing something completely different. If you think back to 1991, fashion advertising was all black and white: Donna Karan, Calvin Klein. . . Tasteful, beautifully shot, black and white. And then we came out with these ads that were colourful, brash and surreal – it’s not surprising people noticed us.’

The company has switched advertising agencies a few times since then, but the strategy remains the same. Diesel’s ads delight in causing offence, combining the garish and the beautiful, the twisted and the sublime. One ad, showing an improbably leggy model perched on a giant cigarette, was emblazoned with the words ‘How to smoke 145 a day’. But the skull at the foot of the image indicated that this was an off-the-wall anti-smoking message. Rosso has often used Diesel’s advertising to make acerbic observations about Western society. A poster showing a pistol-toting male model, a comment on gun culture in the United States, caused uproar in that country. A more recent campaign portrayed consumers as ageless, wrinkle-free drones. The images were accompanied by instructions offering the keys to eternal life.

Whether Diesel's advertising carries a genuine message, or whether it is merely designed to provoke, entertain and draw attention to the brand, it has certainly been effective. Diesel began as a small Italian jeans maker with 18 staff and a clutch of sewing machines. Now it is present in more than 80 countries, with almost 6,000 points of sale and 255 branded stores. Alongside the main product line, the company embraces Diesel Kids and the younger, sportier 55DSL line. Through the Italian manufacturing company Staff International, which it acquired in 2000, it obtained licensing agreements to make clothes for designer brands Vivienne Westwood, DSquared and Martin Margiela. (Rosso has since become the majority shareholder of NEUF Group, the owner and operating company of Maison Martin Margiela.) It even owns a hotel, the Pelican in Miami's South Beach, which, with its Art Deco façade and eyeball-frazzling interior, perfectly captures the Diesel vibe. In fact, when studied carefully, all these elements remain true to the brand's skewed, avant-garde outlook.

The rise of Diesel proves that building a fashion brand is as much about communication as it is about clothes. It's about creating a playground, a diverting fiction. Renzo Rosso is often quoted as saying, 'Diesel is not my company, it's my life.' But his real genius has been to sell the world the product of his imagination.



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When haute couture meets high street

‘It’s not enough to be fashionable – one wishes to appear intelligent as well.’

In the end, the *New York Daily News* summed it up best of all. ‘Fashion king Karl Lagerfeld is a mega-hit for the masses from Manhattan to Milan,’ the newspaper gulped, the day after the pillage (13 November 2004). ‘Throngs of style-seekers stormed H&M stores around the world to scoop up the first moderately priced collection from the world-famous Chanel designer. By the end of the day, the Karl Lagerfeld for H&M line had sold out at the chain’s seven Manhattan stores and across the Atlantic in cities from London to Milan, Munich to Stockholm.’

It was the same story in Paris, where Lagerfeld lives and works. The great man may have even cast a bemused eye upon proceedings from the shadows as shoppers ransacked a store in Les Halles. ‘I reckon I’ve got a collector’s item now,’ 34-year-old Fabrice told *Le Journal du Dimanche* (‘Razzia chez H&M’, 14 November 2004), after snapping up a €150 Lagerfeld suit, clearly unaware that six-Euro pairs of sunglasses from the collection were already being hawked on eBay. Fabrice confessed that, rather than selecting his size and waiting for a changing room, he’d wrenched armfuls of jackets and trousers from their hangers

and tried them on in the corner of the store. The newspaper opined that we could expect to see a lot more of these ‘new adepts of low-priced luxury’.

The Scandinavian brand has since tried to repeat this coup – with, it seems, ever-diminishing returns. Designers who have followed in Lagerfeld’s footsteps include Stella McCartney, Viktor & Rolf and Roberto Cavalli. By now, though, consumers have grown blasé about the idea. When it was announced, the launch of Lagerfeld’s ‘capsule’ collection for H&M was the consummation of a long-time hot and heavy flirtation between haute couture and high street; the two disparate worlds had been moving inexorably towards each other for some time.

STRATEGIC ALLIANCES

There may have been a time when fashion was constructed like a pyramid, with haute couture at the apex, designer ready-to-wear just below, challenger brands in the middle, and a big slab of mass retail at the base. This is no longer the case today – if, indeed, it was ever that simple. Hovering around the structure are streetwear, sportswear and semi-couture, among others. Consumers, too, rather than being content to stay in their allotted sectors, scurry promiscuously from one to the other, picking up a Louis Vuitton bag here and slinging it over a Zara jacket there; wearing a Topshop T-shirt and Gap jeans under a coat from Chanel.

‘It’s not enough to look fashionable – one wishes to appear intelligent as well,’ remarks fashion guru Jean-Jacques Picart. ‘There are two different shifts happening at once. First of all, Chanel, Dior, Gucci and the others will continue to develop luxury as a business. At the same time we are seeing a complementary reaction, which is that a consumer may accept paying for the latest Dior bag, very trendy, that she’s seen in all the magazines and advertisements; but she’ll see no shame in going to Zara and buying a T-shirt for 10 euros, because it’s pretty and it’s a fair quality for the price. Then she may go to another store, a bit more expensive but not as well known, perhaps run by a young designer, where she’ll buy a skirt. And these items, when brought together, reassure her and send a message to others that she’s an intelligent consumer, not dazzled by marketing, in charge of her own image.’

In other words, the era of slavish brand worship is over. Just as everyone today is to some extent a marketing expert, we are also our own stylists. The designer Alber Elbaz, of Lanvin, recently commented, 'We've reached a turning point. Nobody wears logos any more. People aren't hesitating to mix Lanvin with Topshop. Everything is becoming more democratic.' ('Mr Nice Guy', *Numéro*, August 2004.)

The thinking behind the partnership between Lagerfeld and H&M was simple: if the mass market was attracted to the rejuvenated luxury sector, even to the extent of saving up for the occasional pricey item, and if upmarket customers were getting their kicks from unearthing fashionable fripperies at inexpensive stores, then why not formalize the relationship? Luxury brands could show they knew how to talk street, the chain stores would benefit from the glitter, and there would be lots of free publicity for everyone.

The trend can be compared to a parallel evolution among sportswear brands. Rappers have long enjoyed mixing solitaires and sneakers, and multi-brand lifestyle stores such as the pioneering Colette in Paris have been selling sports shoes alongside designer dresses for years. So it's not surprising that names previously associated with the rarefied world of the catwalk have started hooking up with sportswear brands.

Perhaps the most successful of these chimeras is Y-3, the partnership between Yohji Yamamoto and Adidas. The collaboration began when Yamamoto contacted Adidas to ask if he could produce a customized version of the brand's classic Stan Smith sports shoe. Talks led to a co-branding exercise that now has its own identity, complete with stand-alone outlets. The collection runs not only to trainers, but also to clothing, accessories and swimwear. Many of the items utilize the three-stripe Adidas logo. As a whole, the collection resembles a futuristic take on vintage sportswear, as if somebody has strapped a bundle of 1970s Adidas gear to a time machine and hurled it into 2020.

Michael Michalsky, global creative director of Adidas, describes it as a 'win-win situation'. ('Teaming up from arena to runway', *International Herald Tribune*, 10 October 2003.) He has good reason to do so. A sportswear brand that forms this kind of partnership gets the kudos of working with a major design talent, while the designer gains an extra layer of gritty credibility. Adidas is clearly pleased with the outcome, because it has since teamed up with a second top-name designer, Stella McCartney, to create a 'functional sport performance range' for women. Other designer/sports collaborations include a Fred Perry shirt

by Comme des Garçons and a Reebok dress designed by Diane Von Furstenberg.

Taking a slightly different (and arguably more imaginative) tack, Puma has embarked on a partnership with French designer Philippe Starck. Starck is best known for architecture and interiors, although he is increasingly branching out into other areas, from eyewear to beer bottles. In a press release announcing the alliance, Puma's director of global brand management, Antonio Bertone, explained the thinking behind the collaboration: 'The objective of Puma's co-op projects is for an outside designer to share a different perspective so that we can learn from one another.' He added that the project was all about 'pushing the boundaries of design'. But the venture also adds sheen to the brand's image, pushing it further from the locker room and closer to the loft conversion.

CHIC BATTLES CHEAP

Upmarket brands may have begun stalking mass consumers, but the trend labelled 'masslux' (or 'masstige', take your pick) is more about chain stores smartening up. Gap, for instance, recruited the likes of Roland Mouret and shoe designer Pierre Hardy to try and inject some pizzazz into its outmoded image after a long period of declining interest from consumers. In a variation on the theme, cut-price UK brand New Look launched a range by witty British designer Giles Deacon, who once worked at Gucci under Tom Ford.

Several elements combined to drive this evolution. The post-9/11 economic fall-out forced luxury shoppers to tighten their belts, while casting around for a viable alternative that would fool as many observers as possible. High-street shoppers, having spent years soaking up articles about Ford, Galliano, Jacobs, Prada and the rest of the fashion firmament, became design-savvy and demanding. And the retailers wanted to distance themselves from the flood of bargain-basement supermarket labels that was lapping at their heels – a tendency that has been accelerated by the end of textile-trade restrictions at the beginning of 2005 (see Chapter 19: Brave new market).

The emergence of supermarket brands and 'value-led' fashion is worth a brief detour. The reference in the sector is Wal-Mart, the world's biggest store group. When Wal-Mart acquired ASDA in 1999,

the British supermarket chain was already famous for its cut-price clothing brand George, created by Next founder George Davies in 1990. Although the store didn't offer a dramatic retail environment or imaginative marketing, it sold jeans for £4 – along with other cheap and cheerful garments that, while not exactly fashion-forward, were perfectly wearable. ASDA began crowing that George now sold more clothes than British favourite Marks & Spencer.

ASDA is not alone in this growing niche. Tesco has two brands, Cherokee and Florence & Fred, which are edging ever closer to the type of 'fast fashion' items sold by the likes of H&M. These brands are given space in fashion magazines and sold in separate sections of the store, giving them an increased legitimacy. Away from the supermarkets, 'value' outlets such as Matalan, TK Maxx and Primark are nibbling away at the mid-market retailers. One of the first into the sector, Matalan has been selling discounted high-street brands for 20 years. Customers must become 'members' of the organization before they can shop at its 170 or so outlets across the UK. With a loyal customer base thus assured, Matalan saves money by locating its stores out of town, buying clothing in bulk, and selling it in no-nonsense environments.

But Matalan faces major competition in the form of TK Maxx, which stocks genuine designer brands at rock-bottom prices. It's part of the American group TJX, which was founded in 1976 and now bills itself as the world's largest 'off-price' retailer. The magazine *Management Today* explained its approach as follows: 'Like others in the sector, [TK Maxx] keeps costs low with little in the way of merchandizing or advertising, although, as its fame has spread among the more well-heeled shopper in recent years, it has started advertising in magazines such as *Heat* and the *Sunday Times Style* supplement.' ('The low-cost retail revolution', March 2005.)

In the same article, Geoff Lancaster, head of external affairs for Primark's parent company, Associated British Foods, revealed that his chain had a similar strategy: 'We don't have a glossy headquarters. . . Nor do we spend on advertising; it's word-of-mouth. But we are not cheapskates when it comes to distribution; we've invested heavily in logistics.'

As the writer of the article went on to comment, 'The tills are buzzing. Primark's prices are so low, there's simply no comparison with [Marks & Spencer].'

M&S, which prided itself for years on the fact that it never had to advertise to attract customers, appeared to be locked in a protracted and painful decline until it rejuvenated itself with a celebrity-driven ad campaign featuring swinging Sixties icon Twiggy and a handful of younger models. The understatedly chic ads hit exactly the right note for the brand's conservative consumers, who wanted to play it straight but not dowdy. 'Fashion is fickle, as Marks & Spencer knows better than most. For a few years it could do no right and was seen as dowdy and distinctly un-cool. [Now] it is set to announce a healthy sales performance with profits in the region of £745 million, a sharp rise from £90m last year.' ('Twiggy and trifle help put M&S back in fashion', *The Observer*, 9 April 2006.)

The turnaround proved that not everybody wanted to buy cheap clothing in Spartan surroundings. For fashion-led stores, the rise of bargain-basement brands represents an opportunity as well as a threat. With exciting shopping environments, creative advertising, hawk-eyed buying and cutting-edge design, they can retain customers and justify their prices. 'Masstige' is their not-so-secret weapon. A whole range of previously uninspired retailers – Oasis, Target in the United States (fashionistas have taken to giving it an ironic French inflection, as in 'Tar-jay') – have ramped up their creativity with the aid of young designers.

Topshop is way ahead of the game, in the United Kingdom, at least. Even before H&M and Zara came along, its flagship store on London's Oxford Circus was the haunt of beady-eyed stylists and model agency scouts; which led to winking 'you didn't hear it from us' references in the glossies. And although its design has been a cut above the rest for some time, Topshop now has a massluxé range, positioned at a slightly higher price point as a signal to the discerning.

However, when writing about the democratization of fashion, there's no escaping the twin titans of high-street style.

STOCKHOLM SYNDROME

'What is it with you Swedes?' I ask Jörgen Andersson, the marketing director of H&M. 'First Ikea democratized interior design; now you're doing the same thing with fashion. Are you lot on a mission, or something?'

Andersson – who is, as you might expect, tall, good-looking and fair-haired – smiles at the thought. ‘It’s part of our heritage. We’ve been brought up with a Social Democrat government. Since we were young we’ve always been taught that everyone should have an equal choice. It’s not just a business idea, it’s a political one. Ikea was born out of the theory that you don’t have to be rich to appreciate good design. We have the same standpoint on fashion. You can dress from head to toe in Gucci if you like – that proves you’re rich, but it doesn’t prove you have taste. It’s more imaginative to wear your Gucci with some H&M. That’s why *Vogue* readers are among our most loyal clients.’

H&M’s base at Regeringsgaten 48, Stockholm, is certainly democratic in appearance. Located in the commercial centre of the city, just up the road from an enormous H&M flagship store, it is blocky and practical. The lifts, to be quite honest, could do with a bit of a makeover. Annacarin Björne, the company’s press officer, tells me that this no-frills look is quite deliberate: ‘We pride ourselves in being cost-conscious, so we can pass those savings on to our customers. We don’t see the point of flashy offices.’

Company founder Erling Persson opened his first store in Västerås, a small town one hour south of Stockholm, in 1947. Persson had been inspired by a trip to the United States, where he had marvelled at a new kind of ready-to-wear boutique offering fashionable garments at affordable prices. He called his concept simply Hennes, or ‘hers’. In the early 1960s, the chain expanded into Norway and Denmark, and in 1968 it acquired the Stockholm store Mauritz Widforss, which specialized in hunting apparel and equipment. Crucially, the fusion allowed the newly created Hennes & Mauritz to add a masculine dimension to its collection. The first UK store opened in 1976.

In 1982, when Erling Persson’s son Stefan took over as chief executive (he is currently chairman), the company entered a period of international expansion that continues to this day. At the time of my visit, H&M had just added Canada and Slovenia to the map, with Hungary and Ireland due to follow at any moment. The brand has been present in the United States since 2000. In total, it has more than 1,300 stores in 24 countries. It has an annual turnover of more than 68 billion SEK (US\$ 10 billion).

H&M says that it owes its success to three factors: inventive design, the best quality at the best price, and efficient logistics.

The team of 100 designers is based in Stockholm – and Björne stresses that, contrary to popular belief, they do not copy styles that have already appeared on the runways of Paris and Milan. ‘They travel all the time and pick up any number of influences, from street trends, exhibitions, movies, magazines and trade fairs. We’re a bit tired of being accused of copying famous designers. If we did that, we’d be up to our neck in court cases – and that’s money we’d rather save.’

The company’s basic products have long lead times – from six to eight months – but it aims to have high-fashion items in stores two to three weeks after the pattern has left the designer’s PC screen. The company’s 21 production offices (10 each in Europe and Asia, another in Africa), with a total of more than 700 employees, are responsible for liaising with around 750 factories. About 60 per cent of these are in Asia, the rest in Europe. H&M does not own any factories, but it has a lengthy code of conduct that all its suppliers must sign, as well as a team of quality controllers who can swoop in unannounced to ensure the rules are being followed (see Chapter 21: Behind the seams).

According to Jörgen Andersson, ‘Over the past 10 years, [H&M] have become preoccupied with the question of quality. We expect our suppliers to provide products of the highest possible standard at a very fair price, because that’s our promise to the consumer.’

In terms of logistics, no fewer than 3,200 people are devoted to the task. The completed garments pass through a transit warehouse in Hamburg before being dispatched to distribution centres in individual markets. Only transportation is contracted out; otherwise, H&M controls every step of the process, acting as importer, wholesaler and retailer. Computerized stock management ensures that new items arrive in stores every day.

This logistics approach is at variance with Zara’s centralized distribution model (see page 51), and there are other points of difference between the Swedish giant and its Spanish rival. One of them is marketing strategy. Unlike Zara, H&M has never shied away from advertising. Its simple but effective posters – showing models in casual poses against plain white backgrounds – have become a familiar part of the urban landscape. And, until recently, its Christmas lingerie campaign, featuring provocative shots of the hottest models, was a festive tradition attracting frank stares of appreciation, mutters of disapproval and free media coverage in equal measure. (A 1993 series of posters featuring the voluptuous Anna Nicole Smith in retro pin-up mode – right in

the middle of the skinny-girl ‘heroin chic’ period – is regarded as a landmark in the brand’s development.)

But all that has changed. In accordance with the new era of ‘massclusivity’, H&M is going upmarket. Jörgen Andersson says, ‘What we have done very well throughout the 50 years of our existence is to keep our focus on the customer. We have a lean organization and a constant eye on the market, so, as soon as tastes change, we change with them. We don’t dictate style. Our style is whatever our customers demand.’

What the customers want now, according to Andersson, is glamour: ‘Fashion always mirrors society. Many people today can afford a lifestyle that was previously only available to the rich. With low-cost airlines, they can travel to places their parents only dreamed about. You want to be famous? What’s fame, today? You only have to go on a reality TV show to become famous. Celebrity seems just around the corner, so why not live it out while you’re waiting?’

Enter Karl Lagerfeld. A decade ago, it would have been hard to imagine H&M’s young customers evincing much interest in either Chanel or its courtly, white-haired designer. The launch of Lagerfeld’s collection for H&M was promoted worldwide with giant posters and a two-minute TV commercial, all of which replaced the traditional Christmas lingerie campaign. Andersson says, ‘We had been running the underwear campaign for 10 or 12 years, and we felt that it had lost its relevance. We said to ourselves, “Hold on, we’re supposed to be a contemporary company, a fashion company, we need to do something different.” The underwear posters were very much focused on “this year’s most famous model”. But consumers don’t care about that any more. They have become interested in design. They want to know what the new collection looks like.’

H&M linked up with Lagerfeld through the Paris-based freelance art director Donald Schneider. Andersson recalls, ‘Donald created our new customer magazine and worked with us on our advertising. Through his work for *Vogue* he got to know Karl, and we had a conversation about whether Karl might be interested in doing something with us. A short time later, Donald called to say that Karl would like to meet us. So we flew to Paris and after sitting and chatting for a while, Karl said, “Let’s do it – when can we get started?”’

Andersson says Lagerfeld was attracted to the ‘youthful and creative’ elements of the H&M brand. Lagerfeld himself confirmed as much in a flurry of interviews. He told French news magazine *L’Express*, ‘One

day I was in the elevator at Chanel with one of the girls who worked there. She looked very pretty in her tweed coat, and I complimented her on it. She told me, “It comes from H&M – I don’t have the money to buy one here!” Obviously, I hadn’t seen the buttons or the lining up close, but it had a lot of style; modern and well-cut.’ (*Karl Lagerfeld, couturier chez H&M*, 20 September 2004.)

In the same article, Lagerfeld mentions that when H&M sent him a suit for publicity photographs, ‘I didn’t have to make a single alteration.’ He adds, ‘Naturally, the fabric and the finish make a difference, but it’s honest work – certainly more so than the second lines of some designers, [which are] criminal in their condescension and dullness.’

It doesn’t take a marketing genius to grasp the value of quotes like that to H&M. Partnerships with leading designers have now become an important component of the retailer’s strategy. Not with Lagerfeld, though, who complained to German magazine *Stern* shortly after the line’s launch that not enough of the clothes had been made available, adding for good measure the suggestion that H&M’s larger sizes did not flatter his designs. The statement did no harm to either party: the Karl Lagerfeld for H&M line remained a rare one-off, collectable for ever more, and Lagerfeld retained his dignity; H&M was the overall winner, in terms of publicity and prestige.

But Andersson observes that a shift in perception is not enough – the upward sweep must be visible at every intersection with the customer.

‘As well as the qualitative aspects of the garments and the production process, we have been working very much with the appearance of stores. We’ve begun to radically rebuild and redecorate. We know that our customers love to shop – they consider it entertainment. And if the store is the main contact with the customers, we have to enhance that experience.’ (See Chapter 5: The store is the star.)

Aware that its slick new image could create a distancing effect, H&M is building closer links with consumers in other ways. It has tentatively launched a web-based loyalty scheme, available in Sweden and Denmark at the time of writing. Those who sign up receive the H&M magazine – a cross between a catalogue and a traditional glossy – as well as e-mail bulletins, special offers and discounts.

In Andersson’s view, ‘If there’s a group of loyal consumers who love H&M, we should foster that relationship. Mass communication is not always the answer – it’s more efficient to address those who are the most receptive to the message.’ Above all, Andersson believes it is

crucially important to keep sight of the brand's core values, which he lists as 'fashionable, exciting and accessible'.

'Traditionally, fashion has been aloof and superior. You look at the advertising; it takes itself very seriously. H&M is not like that at all. I want people to come to the store because they're going out that night and they need a new top. And they don't hesitate – they buy something for 10 euros, because, let's face it, why not? For that price, you can give it to the Salvation Army the next day if you want. It hardly costs more than a couple of glasses of wine.'

VIVA ZARA

The reception at Inditex is very big and very white. It is, in fact, a glistening expanse of white tiles, with a horseshoe-shaped reception desk way over there in the distance. The walls are pale too, and entirely picture-free. I'm later told that this minimalism is for the benefit of employees: we're in Galicia, in grey and rainy northern Spain, and these spacious, pristine, light-deluged surroundings keep staff cheerful and motivated during the winter months.

Less than an hour ago, a taxi picked me up outside my hotel in La Coruña, the faintly raffish port that is the nearest large town. It feels a long way from cosmopolitan Barcelona or frenetic Madrid. This is the kind of place where fishing boats pull into the harbour every morning; where lunch is a slice of tortilla and a beer; where couples promenade in the square at dusk, surrounded by kids kicking footballs and observed by creased oldsters nursing coffees. The shopping district is a grid of well-preserved streets dotted with affordable boutiques, many of which belong to Inditex. One of them, in Calle Juan Flórez, is the first-ever Zara store.

It was in a shop window in La Coruña, so the story goes, that Zara founder Amancio Ortega and his fiancée saw a beautiful silk negligée with a barely believable price tag. Ortega, then working at a local shirt-maker, ran up a variation on the high-priced number. His fiancée loved it, and Señor Ortega started his own business producing glamorous but affordable nightwear. He later moved into general fashion, with the affirmed aim of bringing catwalk style to the street. He opened the first branch of Zara in 1975. Originally, the store was to be called Zorba, after the character played by Ortega's favourite actor, Anthony

Quinn, in the film *Zorba the Greek*. He couldn't obtain permission to use the name, so he played with the letters until he arrived at Zara, which sounded feminine and exotic. (The name should be pronounced the Spanish way: 'Thara'.)

The chain grew steadily throughout the 1980s, but did not open its first store outside Spain until 1989, when it hopped across the border to Oporto, Portugal. Paris followed, then New York. The store didn't reach London until 1998, by which time the fashion pack had carried news of the brand back from shopping excursions to Barcelona. On opening day, the place was mobbed. In May 2001, the brand launched on the Madrid Stock Exchange – and Amancio Ortega's billionaire status was assured.

Today, the Inditex group embraces Zara – which provides 70 per cent of its income – and a clutch of other brands: Bershka (young mainstream fashion); Pull And Bear (urban streetwear and accessories); Oysho (lingerie); Massimo Dutti (classic fashion); Kiddy's Class (children's clothing); and Stradivarius (fashion and accessories). Zara Home, which aims to do for interiors what Zara has done for fashion, launched in 2003 as a separate chain. The Inditex group has more than 3,600 stores across 68 countries, 69,000 employees and sales of €8.2 billion a year, with profits of over €1 billion.

The secret to Zara's appeal is that, although shopping there is cheap, it doesn't *feel* cheap. The stores are large, swish and centrally located. The clothes are given room to breathe and usually – unless it's a Saturday afternoon during the sales – so are the customers. And then there are the clothes themselves. Zara is renowned for whisking budget interpretations of catwalk styles into its stores with breathtaking speed. A designer dress photographed on a model during fashion week won't arrive in department stores for months – but something very like it can be spotted hanging in Zara in a couple of weeks. This infuriates the designers, but delights customers who can't stretch to the originals – or no longer see the point of trying.

'I am sorry, but I don't think it will be possible for you to interview any employees,' apologizes Carmen, the press officer who will be my guide at Inditex, after greeting me in the blinding-white reception area. This is not entirely surprising, as the company is famously enigmatic. Before its stock-exchange flotation, few journalists had set foot in the Inditex headquarters. Even today, Señor Ortega never, ever gives interviews. (I glimpse him during my tour, though: a sturdy, tough-

looking figure with the sleeves of his white shirt rolled up, as hands-on as he has always been, even though he is one of the richest men in the world. Later, I spot him again – this time in the staff canteen.)

The company prides itself on having spent hardly a penny on conventional advertising throughout its history. No posters, no print and certainly no TV. Carmen tells me, ‘The reason for not spending money on publicity is that it doesn’t bring any added value to our customers. We would rather concentrate on our offering in terms of design, prices, rapid turn-around of stock and the store experience. That’s why we have stores in the smartest locations and devote a lot of attention to façades, interiors and window displays. Our stores are our way of communicating.’

Everything about Zara is streamlined for efficiency. The building I’m standing in is the hub of the brand, and there are very few stages between here and the customer. Design, purchasing, pattern-making, samples and visual merchandizing are all handled in-house. More than 50 per cent of the clothes, particularly high-fashion items, are made in Zara’s own factories in Spain, most of them close to its headquarters. An enormous 480,000-square-metre logistics centre is capable of handling 60,000 garments an hour, whizzing orders twice a week from the green suburbs of La Coruña to stores all over the world.

‘Each order contains our latest items as well as those requested by the store managers,’ Carmen explains. ‘The store managers are a vital part of our strategy. They monitor the tastes and demands of their customers, and tailor stock accordingly. That’s why different Zara stores in different cities – or even two stores in the same city – rarely stock exactly the same products. The clothes reflect the profile of the customers.’

Zara’s product managers keep in touch with stores, seeking feedback from customers and monitoring the popularity or otherwise of items. Tills are computer-linked with headquarters, providing a constant stream of sales data: ‘We know within a day or so whether or not a product is successful.’

The tour takes me through each element of the production process. In the design area, I comment on the pile of fashion magazines next to a designer’s computer terminal. Carmen says, ‘We don’t invent trends, we follow them. Styles, colours, fabrics – we don’t guess any of these things. We are a business catering to a demand, and we’ve never made any secret of that. But we need to know what the trends are, so

we follow them through magazines, fashion shows, movies and city streets. We use trend-trackers and forecasting companies. We keep our eyes open.'

Zara has been accused of flagrant piracy, which it denies. And there's perhaps a certain amount of snobbery in the implication that a company from an obscure corner of northern Spain has no right to ape catwalk styles. In fact, the region has a strong fashion tradition, and is home to leading Spanish designers such as Adolfo Dominguez, Roberto Verino and Purificacion Garcia. It is true to say, however, that Zara specializes in 'fast fashion', cranking out some 11,000 different models a year.

As I continue my tour, we come across a visual merchandizing specialist laying garments flat on the floor, then standing to see how the colours look together. When she's happy with the arrangement, she transfers the clothes to shelves that mimic those in the stores. ('That's another reason for the white floors,' remarks Carmen.) Nothing about the stores is left to chance. Passing through a doorway, we emerge into a ghostly street of 'pilot stores', where window and interior displays are mocked up before being transmitted to branches around the world. Although it is June, the windows are dressed for winter. (I make a mental note to snap up a dandyish black corduroy jacket.) The posters inside the stores – the closest Zara ever gets to advertising – are the responsibility of the corporate image department.

Breaking for lunch in the Inditex canteen, I can't help remarking on the college refectory atmosphere. In fact, with its modernity, bustle and hordes of scrubbed, trendy young people, the entire building resembles a college campus. Carmen tells me that the average age there is 26. There are romances, relationships, even marriages. Apparently, Señor Ortega approves: 'He likes the idea of a family atmosphere. He tries to make working conditions pleasant because he wants to attract talented people, and to keep them here. After all, it's not an obvious place to live and work, compared to Barcelona or Madrid.'

We hop into a car to tour the peripheral buildings that make up the Inditex estate. Our next stop is a factory floor, where four cutting tables can cut as many as 8,000 garments a day. The highlight, though, is inevitably the logistics centre, whose immense size defies description. It works rather like a mail-sorting office, except that the envelopes and parcels are boxes or hanging plastic sheaths of garments. Each of the system's 1,200 slots corresponds to an individual store somewhere on

the map. 'Everything is computerized, and there are very few errors,' says Carmen.

After what seems like half a lifetime of writing about advertising, I'm slightly numbed by Amancio Ortega's achievement: a global fashion brand with barely a photographed pout in sight. But it's not entirely accurate to say that Zara's stores are its only form of communication. There are also those dark blue paper carrier bags, dangling smartly from wrists on buses and trains and in the street, in every city, everywhere.

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54