7

# The image-makers

*'There's inevitably something appealing about an imagined better world.'*

The relationship between fashion brands and other product categories is rather like the one between celebrities and normal citizens: they are aware of one another's existence, they occasionally share the same space, but they rarely mingle. While other brands hire international advertising agencies such as J. Walter Thompson, Saatchi & Saatchi or BBDO, fashion brands tend to work directly with a narrow pool of freelance talents.

According to art director Thomas Lenthal, who has worked for brands such as Dior and Yves Saint Laurent, 'In fashion, there are probably only about a dozen well-known art directors, great photographers, stylists, make-up people, and so on. You don't need an advertising agency: you just need an address book with a handful of names in it.'

Many upmarket fashion brands don't have a marketing department; or even a person with 'marketing' in their job title. The designer – often known as an 'artistic director' – is responsible for advertising imagery too. For instance, while Louis Vuitton works with the advertising agency BETC Luxe on several aspects of its communications, its fashion imagery is entirely under the control of the brand's designer, Marc Jacobs.

With this in mind, a few years ago Hervé Morel set up an organization in Paris and New York called ADM – Art Direction Management. Morel does not have an agency, but he is an agent, handling a group of art directors and other creatives that includes Thomas Lenthal, Donald Schneider (H&M, Van Cleef & Arpels, *Vogue Hommes International*), Mathieu Trautmann (Oscar de la Renta Perfumes, Issey Miyake Perfumes, *Jalouse* magazine), Steve Hiett (Kenzo Perfumes), and Laurent Fétis (Cacharel Perfumes, Bless), among others. According to Morel, it was ADM that introduced Donald Schneider to H&M, which eventually led to the store's publicity-generating partnership with Karl Lagerfeld.

Morel says, 'Designer brands may employ an agency to buy their advertising space, but they don't work with agencies on the creative side. It's more cost-effective to work directly with an art director, who can then bring together the other elements – the photographer, the model and so forth. Agencies tend to put forward teams that include a copywriter. But international fashion brands, which use the same images worldwide and work purely with visual stimuli, don't need copywriters. Plus, art directors have usually gained experience on fashion magazines, so they are comfortable in that world.'

Lenthal echoes his views: 'The structure of an advertising agency makes it an unwieldy vehicle. The one thing an ad agency fears above all else is losing a client, and in order not to do that it ensures that the creative process is as risk-free as possible. There are a lot of meetings involving eight people sitting around a table with somebody making notes, so everything is agreed with back-up in writing. The agency has a huge team consisting of the creative director, the art director, the copywriter, the account director, the strategic planner. . . they try to mirror the structure of the large corporations they are working for. But a fashion house is a much smaller unit.'

Robert Triefus, executive vice president, worldwide communications, at Giorgio Armani, confirms the approach at many fashion houses: 'We decide the communication themes, the imagery and the overall strategy at our head office here in Milan. We don't have an ad agency – we have our own graphics studio covering advertising materials as well as point of sale and store windows. We do, however, collaborate with famous photographers and art directors. It boils down to the fact that fashion is a very particular arena, and the creation of an image that is relevant and appropriate to the fashion world, given that it

is a very aspirational product, requires the involvement of people who can really get under the skin of the brand. While I don't wish to criticize advertising agencies, historically fashion has not been their domain – much to their disappointment. Agencies don't necessarily have people who understand the nuances of a fashion brand. I'm sure a person from an advertising agency would have thrown your tape recorder at me by now; and certainly it's a long-running argument. They often claim we don't know what we're doing. We disagree.'

Advertising agencies say that the cliquish fraternity fashion brands work with means that their ads are often indistinguishable. And indeed it's doubtful that many fashion images could pass the marketing test that involves taking a bunch of print ads, covering up their brand names, and seeing which of them has a recognizable visual identity. Advertising for designer brands – whether clothing or accessories – is frequently sensual and elegant, but it can also be clichéd, humourless and chokingly pretentious.

In late 2004, Chanel spent a reported €26 million on a television commercial (the press office called it a 'mini movie') and print campaign to re-launch its No. 5 perfume. The TV ad starred Nicole Kidman and was directed by Baz Luhrmann, who was also behind the actress's hit film, *Moulin Rouge*. To some, the ad looked spectacular. But was it entirely a case of sour grapes when Trevor Beattie, the well-known adman, wrote in *The Guardian* that the ad 'sucks so hard it vacuumed my living room carpet'? ('The ads that stole Christmas', 6 December 2004.)

Beattie, at the time the chairman and creative director of London agency TBWA, has had considerable experience in fashion, having helped to create one of the most successful British high-street brands: French Connection UK. The acronym 'FCUK' had been used solely on internal mail until Beattie spotted and unlocked its marketing potential. 'FCUK fashion', said the store's advertising, and young consumers quickly bought into the message. Media outrage only fuelled demand. Lately, however, it seems that over-familiarity with the logo has blunted its shock appeal. Experiencing a sales slump, French Connection is downplaying its appearance on clothes and in advertising, at the same time insisting that it hasn't dumped the brand completely. Nevertheless, FCUK had an impressive run, and is a good example of what an advertising agency can achieve for a fashion brand, as long as there's a sharp creative at the helm.

And it is by no means the only example. The UK-based agency Bartle Bogle Hegarty has created consistently award-winning campaigns for Levi's in a relationship that stretches back to the 1980s. Its ability to constantly refresh the brand in the mind of the fickle young consumer – and in a highly competitive market – is certainly admirable. Diesel is another company that has worked with a series of advertising agencies. However, the brand's creative director, Wilbert Das, has ultimate control over its advertising messages, and admits that he prefers to work with 'small, energetic agencies'. 'We've worked with one large agency, Lowe Howard Spink, and, while it was an interesting process, I found their structure just too large for us,' he says. 'You should really feel that an agency is part of your brand, which is not always possible with a big international network.'

There is also a considerable gulf between a largely British chain store, a hip jeans brand, and a global luxury giant such as Chanel or Yves Saint Laurent. Here, perhaps, a more elitist approach is required.

## PORTRAIT OF AN ART DIRECTOR

Thomas Lenthal has been fascinated by fashion since the age of five, when he enjoyed cutting pictures out of glossy magazines. 'Fashion is all about idealizing, and there's inevitably something appealing about an imagined better world,' he points out. In his early 20s he worked as assistant at a French fashion magazine called *Femme* (it no longer exists) with famed Swiss art director Peter Knapp as his mentor. From there, Lenthal moved on to the French edition of *Glamour*, where he formed a creatively rewarding working relationship with the editor Babette Djian.

Lenthal recalls, 'We were doing something very different at the time. The French magazine market has improved immeasurably since the 1990s, but back then publishers were determined to deliver exactly what they thought the female population was expecting. We didn't want to produce a women's magazine, but a fashion magazine. We discovered that 30 per cent of our readership was male – not just gay, but straight too. They liked the girls we used, and there was solid arts and culture coverage.'

Djian and Lenthal went on to found *Numéro*, still one of the most highly regarded French fashion magazines. In the first year of the title's

existence, Lenthal was contacted by Dior, which recruited him on a part-time basis to take care of advertising, as well as related communications such as window displays. During that period, Lenthal recommended the photographer Nick Knight, 'because I felt he would be the perfect person to work alongside [Dior designer] John Galliano'.

Lenthal says that establishing a relationship with all the parties involved in a brand campaign is one of the art director's greatest challenges: 'Usually you are working closely with a designer, so it's very important that there is an atmosphere of respect and trust between you. But very often you also find that you're the liaison between the designer and the management. You become a combination of diplomat and translator, because most of the time they speak quite different languages.'

The combination of Galliano, Lenthal and Knight resulted in one of the best-known examples of the style that became known as 'porno chic'. 'Guilty as charged,' says Lenthal. 'We did a controversial campaign featuring two gorgeous models [Gisele Bündchen and Rhea Durham] embracing each other and sweating. It was almost a new start for Dior, because it was bold, extreme and arrogant – everything a great fashion house should be; or at least, needed to be at the time.'

Lenthal had already gained an insight into Galliano's style by looking at the designer's runway shows. 'I knew there was a certain stylish brashness and brutality about his designs. The campaign was overtly erotic, but it was also an exaggerated version of the interaction between French women, who are much more touchy-feely than the British, for instance. Nick's photography was sharp and luscious, which turned the image into something iconic. Dior was, after all, a fashion icon. There are clouds in the background – what you're looking at is Dior's version of heaven. Many of the elements made perfect sense.'

Lenthal's explanation brings to mind a theory I've heard often while investigating fashion marketing, which is that the brand references are extremely subtle. Although ads can look similar, codes saturate the image, and the target audience receives the message almost subliminally.

Dior's glam-trash new look was a hit. Lenthal says, 'To their credit, the management [LVMH] backed the idea wholeheartedly, even though it was outrageous, especially for Dior. Bernard Arnault was incredibly supportive. I think it was the first time John had really felt at home there. They were encouraging him to be himself, so this was his way

of saying, "You want young? You want sexy? All right, I'll show you – because I guess you haven't been in a nightclub for a while."'

Later came the collection Galliano called 'Trailer Park Chic'. The related advertising imagery, says Lenthal, consisted essentially of 'tarts covered with grease on a scrap heap'. He cackles delightedly at the recollection: 'Once again, it wasn't exactly something you'd associate with a French fashion house. The consumers loved it.'

Perhaps inevitably, after leaving Dior, Lenthal ended up working with the Gucci Group's star designer, Tom Ford, on Yves Saint Laurent beauty products. 'At first I wasn't sure I could work with Tom, because his aesthetics were so well defined that I didn't know if I would have any room to experiment. The good thing was that he was already in the mood to do something different; and particularly with Yves Saint Laurent he felt that he needed to differentiate it [from his work for Gucci]. This time we stuck quite closely to the roots of the brand, as envisaged by Yves Saint Laurent himself. The interesting thing about my job is that you are reinterpreting codes and values that may have been established many years ago. And you can either decide to push the imagery a long way from the core of the brand, or hover more closely around it. The important thing is to always be aware of the brand's origins.'

Tom Ford left Yves Saint Laurent – and the Gucci Group – in early 2004. In Lenthal's view, 'He did an extremely valuable job in that he put the brand back in the spotlight, when before there was a feeling that nothing had been going on there for a while.' Since then, Lenthal has been working with the label's new artistic director, the Italian Stefano Pilati, who is deeply respectful of the Saint Laurent heritage. Lenthal feels that the brand is 'particularly rich' – starting with the YSL logo, designed by the poster artist Cassandre in 1963, which remains unchanged. He says, 'With Saint Laurent you have so much to explore, particularly the way he makes colours clash instead of trying to get them to blend together. He is famous for his daring colour palette. He also designed for a certain type of woman, so when you're doing the casting you naturally look at the kind of models he used in the 1970s. For me, today, [the model] Karen Elson is the quintessential Saint Laurent girl, with her red hair and very pale skin.' Interestingly, the actress Catherine Deneuve, who has worn Saint Laurent in a number of films, has also expressed a particular view of the typical Saint Laurent

woman; she once said that the designer created clothes for 'women who have double lives'.

Lenthal believes that the same team should create a fashion brand's communications in its entirety – for clothing, accessories and beyond – even though, with branded perfumes usually licensed to large beauty companies, this is not always the case (see Chapter 13: Accessorize all areas). At the time of our interview, Lenthal has just begun to work on the fashion element of YSL, as well as the beauty side, and says it is his intention to 'try and link the two': 'I like to think that once you understand a brand, you can imagine every element within its specific world, even down to the objects. Is there a particular Saint Laurent chair, telephone, or lamp? The answer is "yes".'

## THE ALTERNATIVE IMAGE-MAKER

One of the most talked-about companies in branding is not an advertising agency, a marketing consultancy, a public relations adviser, or an events organizer. It is all of these things – and none of them. With offices in London and Los Angeles, Exposure is based around the concepts of networking, leveraging influence channels, and brand advocacy. It can handle everything from getting a fashion brand into a music video or on to the back of a celebrity, to linking seemingly unrelated brands for mutually attractive partnerships, and much more besides. It was Exposure that teamed Matthew Williamson with Coca-Cola for the series of limited-edition bottles mentioned in Chapter 4.

Raoul Shah founded Exposure in 1993. He had graduated in textiles management and did a short stint at Agnès B in Paris before joining Pepe Jeans back in the UK, where he became closely embroiled in the company's marketing strategy. He recalls, 'The brand was growing phenomenally at the time. Most of the marketing was done in-house, so I learned how to do everything, from dressing windows to point of sale. It was an incredible experience; by the time I left, I knew how to market a brand in every conceivable way.'

Shah decided to use his knowledge to found his own business. His simple but effective concept was to build brands by introducing them to the right people. 'I realized that, thanks to my time at Pepe, I had this network of people that crossed fashion, music, film, clubs, the drinks

industry. . . and I thought that by using my contacts and my friends, and by bringing brands together with them, I could create some extremely interesting marketing opportunities.'

Exposure's joint managing director, Tim Bourne, who came from a sales promotion background, brought an additional commercial element to the business. 'We created a dual pillar structure,' explains Shah, 'with fashion and lifestyle on the one hand, and FMCG [fast-moving consumer goods] – sales promotions, sponsorships and so forth – on the other. But the idea was that they should cross over. We saw even back then that many mainstream brands were beginning to take on the characteristics of fashion and lifestyle brands, in that they wanted to look for alternative ways of reaching an audience.'

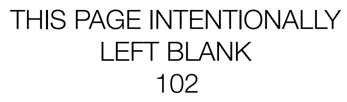
Exposure has worked with a wide range of clients, not only in fashion (Burberry, Dr. Martens, Converse, Dockers, Levi's, Nike, Quiksilver and Topshop, to name but a few), but also in beauty, retail, FMCG, catering, movies, automotive. . . you name it. It even manages the European media coverage of the hip-hop star Damon Dash. The organization is now divided into a number of interconnected divisions, including media relations and publicity, partnerships and product placement, sales promotion and events, design and production, consumer insights and brand consulting, and digital marketing. It also has its own gallery and showroom.

A handful of Exposure case studies would take up many thousands of words (take a look instead at www.exposure.net), but the key to its success, it appears, is to shake up brands in a way that creates a surprising, media-friendly cocktail. Hence Dr. Martens boots customized by the likes of Vivienne Westwood and Jean-Paul Gaultier; or a serious museum exhibition about 'trainer culture' for sports-shoe retailer Foot Locker. Exposure asked lingerie brand Agent Provocateur to customize a Triumph motorcycle – the appropriately named Thruxton 900 was given a pink paint job featuring pin-ups in a state of *déshabillé*. Then it got the magazine *Tank* to design a coffee-table book for Oxo.

The beauty of Exposure's operation is that the elements that make up its network are constantly spinning off and re-connecting. The brands, creative talents and celebrities with which the agency has a relationship can be mixed and matched to suit the task in hand. None of this is rocket science – and other agencies have since copied the format – but Exposure seems to generate an inordinate amount of respect among the notoriously prickly fashion and celebrity community.

'The key to it all is that as a company we're very people-oriented,' explains Shah. 'We're honest about what we do, we don't over-promise, we're professional. People who work with us enjoy the experience, so they trust us the next time. We do very little of our own publicity – it's all by word-of-mouth.'

Shah seems vaguely surprised that there are still brands that haven't got the message. 'Fashion advertising is very formulaic, and sometimes I question the validity of that formula. When you consider that you can make the phone ring off the hook in a store just by placing one jacket on the right celebrity for the right party, traditional advertising is not tremendously cost-effective. The really exciting brands are the ones who take risks: I'm thinking here of Helmut Lang placing his ads in *National Geographic* magazine, or on the top of New York taxi cabs. . . We've reached a stage where consumers and the media are so saturated with demands on their time that brands have to work much harder to get noticed at all.'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# 8

# They shoot dresses, don't they?

*'The photographer has an enormous influence on the branding process.'*

Flashback to June 2003. I'm standing under the portico outside the Victoria & Albert Museum, sheltering from a summer storm that has raced in from nowhere to dash the streets with raindrops the size of boiled sweets. Beside me, tourists mutter exclamations and unfurl umbrellas, or haul vivid cagoules over their clothes. Frankly, I'm grateful for the enforced pause in the day, because it gives me time to think. I've just seen an exhibition of fashion photography so disturbing – so downright weird – that it has shaken up my idea of what the alluring métier of snapping models in dresses is all about.

A couple of days earlier, the photographer's name, Guy Bourdin, had been only vaguely familiar to me. But a friend recommended the show, and I'd found the promotional poster intriguing. It was at the same time compelling and repellent, showing a girl's long white legs splayed over a sofa as if she had collapsed face down. She wore scarlet high-heels. The sofa was orange, and so was the bottom of her very tight, very short dress, which along with the curve of her buttocks was all that remained visible before she was cut off by the frame. The image was strongly

ambiguous: could this be a corpse; or was she in an alcohol-induced coma? It certainly didn't look like standard fashion photography.

The other pictures reinforced this idea. They were often erotic, frequently perverse and mostly eerie; reflections in TV screens in cheap hotel rooms; the suggestion of unseen figures lurking outside the frame; latent violence. Bourdin seemed to be equating fashion with lust, and imagining its potentially terrible consequences. Elsewhere there were hints of dark satire: a group of models striding past a shop window display looked barely more human than the mannequins trapped behind the glass. Each picture was lit with the icy clarity of a crime scene; an idea taken to its logical conclusion with a picture of a discarded pair of shoes next to the chalk outline of a dead body. Some of Bourdin's work resembled that of another ground-breaking fashion photographer, Helmut Newton; but to me the images had more in common with Hitchcock and Edward Hopper.

Bourdin worked for French *Vogue* and shot a series of advertisements for Charles Jourdan shoes – a project that allowed him to give full reign to his fetishist imagery. Despite the fact that most of the pictures in the exhibition dated from the 1970s, they had hardly aged. This was not surprising, because I discovered that, although Bourdin died in 1991, his influence continues to saturate fashion advertising today. Contemporary art directors such as Thomas Lenthal and photographers such as Nick Knight acknowledge a huge debt to Bourdin. He is generally regarded as the first fashion photographer to have shifted the focus away from the product and towards the imagery. Before Bourdin, fashion advertising used fairly conventional depictions of female sexuality to sell products. Bourdin subverted the form. Instead of entire bodies, he showed fragmentary images of limbs. Models and actresses were dismembered by his lens, or mutated by make-up into ashen-faced cartoons of femininity. His fashion spreads were narratives, resembling stills from surreal thrillers. Bourdin realized that fashion advertising was not just a picture of a dress or a pair of shoes; it was an imaginary universe. In doing so, he placed the photographer at the forefront of the process that transforms a garment or an accessory into an object of desire.

## BRAND TRANSLATORS

'Fashion photography is about translating a brand into a concept,' says Vincent Peters, the German-born, London-based photographer whose list of credits includes British, Italian and French *Vogue*, *Arena*, *Dazed and Confused* and *Numéro*, as well as ads for Dior, Bottega Veneta, Celine, Miu Miu and Yves Saint Laurent. 'Often, when a client comes to you, they have a product and a brand identity, but they aren't certain how to combine the two. Your job is to achieve that transition; to create the image that brings the brand to life. Sometimes the client has a reasonable idea of how you're going to do it – after all, that's why they've hired you – but in my experience they like to be surprised. This means that the photographer has an enormous influence on the branding process.'

Peters began taking pictures on a trip to Thailand in the 1980s, with the results being published in a travel magazine. In 1989 he moved to New York, where he got a job as an assistant photographer. Soon he branched out on his own, moving into fashion photography. After a while, though, he developed an ambition to become an artistic photographer, and relocated to Paris to pursue his goal. Although his work was exhibited throughout Europe and published in leading art photography magazines, he grew disenchanted with the scene and decided to refocus his efforts on fashion photography: 'I remember I had a season when it all suddenly began happening for me. I shot a campaign for Miu Miu, and that made a difference. Things evolved quite quickly after that.'

Fashion photographers have always combined commerce with art. The earliest practitioner with something of the star status accorded today's snappers was one Baron Adolphe de Meyer, nicknamed 'the Debussy of the camera'. (Although he was not from an aristocratic background, he married into nobility.) From 1913 to the early 1930s he brought an other-worldly lustre to his photographs of socialites, actresses and dancers, first for American *Vogue* and then for *Bazar* (which later evolved into *Harper's Bazaar*, picking up an extra 'a' along the way).

In 1923, de Meyer was replaced at *Vogue* by another pioneer, Edward Steichen, whose pictures already looked more crisp and modernist than the soft-focus confections favoured by his predecessor. Steichen may have taken the first colour fashion photograph, but he was far more interested in the art of photography than in fashion. In the early

1900s he'd been a friend of the sculptor Auguste Rodin, and he later co-founded, with Alfred Stieglitz, Photo-Secession, an organization whose sole aim was to elevate photography into an art form. Between 1947 and 1962 Steichen was director of photography at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Another founding father of fashion photography, whose background was almost as aristocratic as that of de Meyer, was George Hoyningen-Huene. Born in Russia, he had escaped the revolution with his family and pitched up in London before moving to Paris after the First World War. He started out as a backdrop designer for shoots before moving on to photography with the encouragement of French *Vogue*'s editor, Main Bocher. Hoyningen-Huene, too, was later lured away to *Harper's Bazaar*. His photographs of Josephine Baker, Joan Crawford and the model Lee Miller – eventually an influential photographer in her own right – have a frosty monochrome poetry about them.

In this respect, Hoyningen-Huene's work resembled that of his protégé, Horst P. Horst, who was inspired by Greek statues and Renaissance art. Technology had not yet freed the camera from the studio, so their pictures inevitably look stiff and enclosed, and reliant on props and backdrops for atmosphere. Cecil Beaton, the final member of this precursory quartet, used props to sometimes surreal effect, deploying sculptures of papier-mâché and aluminium backdrops. Born in London in 1904, Beaton had been captivated as a child by postcards of glamorous society women; and this influence is still apparent in his costume designs and art direction for films such as *My Fair Lady*, for which he won an Academy Award in 1964.

By the Second World War, Leica was producing cameras with faster shutter speeds – an advance that urged fashion photography outdoors and encouraged breezy spontaneity. This ushered in the era of Irving Penn, Richard Avedon and Norman Parkinson. There is the gulf of a generation between Horst's stony goddesses and Avedon's early photos of models frolicking on a beach; or Parkinson's exotic, sun-drenched location shots.

Parkinson, known to one and all as 'Parks', formed a stylistic bridge between the pre-war practitioners and the emerging generation of the 1960s, who added sexual liberation to photography's physical freedom from restraint. Working for British *Vogue*, Parks brought an impish spirit to his pictures of strong, provocative women, which did not look at all out of place beside the images being turned out by the rebellious

trio of David Bailey, Terence Donovan and Brian Duffy (see Chapter 9: This year's model). With their unambiguous, cool-yet-accessible aesthetic, these photographs look as innocent now as they must have seemed decadent at the time.

In the 1970s, a seismic shift caused tremors that are still being felt today. It was provoked by Bourdin and, of course, Helmut Newton. Vincent Peters cites Newton, who died in early 2004, as one of a handful of icons who sought to change fashion photography in particular, as opposed to photography in general: 'Guy Bourdin's world was not about fashion. What makes Helmut Newton so irreplaceable is that he really was about fashion photography – he was determined to push it as far as it could go, to make it sexy and dangerous rather than cold and bourgeois. He did for dresses what James Bond did for suits. In the 1970s there were no rules, no formulas, so if you had the talent you were free to experiment.'

In the 1980s, fashion photography benefited from an evolution within the fashion media itself. New magazines such as *Blitz*, *The Face* and *i-D* – the latter started by Terry Jones, a former art director at British *Vogue* – had an irreverent, slash-and-paste style that owed far more to punk than to catwalk shows. They proved fertile ground for photographers like Nick Knight, Corinne Day, Juergen Teller and Terry Richardson, whose pictures pushed clothes – and sometimes models themselves – further into the background, relegating them to mere ingredients in entertaining tapestries. Photography took on a hyper-real, snapshot air, with the merciless light of the flashgun illuminating seedy domestic scenes, drug-fuelled nightclubs, or parties that seemed to have dragged on far too long. These pictures were personal and observational, pulling the viewer into the world of the individual who had taken them.

Corinne Day became notorious for creating the so-called 'heroin chic' look, with a series of photographs featuring Kate Moss. The pictures, which appeared in the June 1993 issue of British *Vogue*, showed the model looking wan and undernourished, clad in vest and knickers and posing in a dingy flat. The shoot, which spawned hundreds of pale facsimiles, contributed to the 'grunge' fashion trend.

Richardson's lurid, funny, blatantly sexual pictures – famously shot on an old Instamatic – continue to provoke controversy today. In an interview with online fashion magazine *Hint*, he refers to his playfully erotic advertising work for the fashion brand Sisley. 'We tried to put a picture of a girl with pompoms over her tits on a poster in Soho [New

York]. They said no, because a little of her areola was showing. . . They said it was too sexy and it would be too close to a church and a school. It's all so silly and conservative.' Despite his involvement in fashion, the photographer's attitude to clothes has a timeless ring about it: 'To me, photographs are more about people than clothes. I'm not one of those photographers who says, "Ooh, that dress is just making me crazy."' (www.hintmag.com/shootingstars/terryrichardson)

Photographers can take comfort in the existence of magazines such as *Visionaire*, a format-shifting blend of fashion publication and portable art gallery in which clothes definitely take second place to ideas. It has occasionally provided a setting for the work of photography duo Inez Van Lamsweerde and Vinoodh Matadin, who utilize digital technology to produce the kind of images Bourdin might have come up with, had he used a computer. Disturbing and disorienting, the pictures are filled with digitally contorted limbs, manipulated expressions and artificial landscapes. All of these photographers have lent their talents to advertising, as well as contributing to fashion magazines. And with their peers, they continue to blur the boundaries between art, fashion and marketing.

## THE LIMITS OF EXPERIMENTATION

Other, more pragmatic industries might have shied away from the idea of artistry to promote a product. In fashion, however, it has traditionally been seen as a brand value. But Vincent Peters fears that, in the advertising field, photographers now have fewer opportunities to take risks: 'The fashion business, like Hollywood, is increasingly controlled by people who don't come from the creative tradition. It's a stock-market product.' This, he believes, encourages blandness and fuels criticism that all fashion advertising looks alike. 'Nobody wants to throw money away, so of course they're going to look at what's worked before and go down a similar route. Fortunately, there are still enough clients left who want something challenging.'

In terms of trends, he believes that fashion photography has become less narrative and more conceptual: '[Advertising clients] are looking for the big idea. This is a huge challenge for the photographer, because sometimes you're called upon to invent a brand with a single image. At

the same time, it's good for us, because it makes us indispensable to the process.'

Art director Thomas Lenthal would agree. During our conversation about his work for Yves Saint Laurent, he said, 'I've always advocated the fact that if you're working for a brand, you've got to build a visual alphabet for it. Within that framework you can tell a great many stories, but I think it makes sense to link them through that visual alphabet – and the easiest way of doing that is to use the same photographer.'

Having said that, a fashion photograph is a collaborative effort, requiring the participation of art directors, stylists, make-up artists and assistants, all bustling around the central figure of the model. As Vincent Peters confirms, 'It takes an incredible amount of time and finesse, almost like making a movie. A lot of money is being spent on this one key image, so you have to get it right. Is the sun shining, is the hair and make-up the way you want it? Every detail counts. When people outside fashion say that all the advertising looks the same, they aren't paying attention to the details. But at the luxury end of the market, where I tend to work, consumers notice details.'

He adds that the life of a fashion photographer is not always an easy one: 'Don't forget, we're all freelances, and in fashion your fortunes can change very quickly. There's always somebody standing behind you. To a certain extent, you're only as good as your last piece of work. It's a delicate balance, because you want to maintain a personal style, while striving to provide something different each time. If you do three shoots in the same way, people think you're getting lazy. So we're under a great deal of pressure.'

For a while, it looked as though photographers might be losing ground to fashion illustrators. Established artists such as François Berthoud, David Downton, Charles Anastase, Jordi Labanda and Yoko Ikeno became increasingly influential, both in publishing and advertising circles. In 2002, Stella McCartney engaged the artist David Remfry to create an advertising campaign, sparking numerous articles about the trend. One of them, in *The Observer*, opined that this approach was 'valued for being warmly personal' and went on to explain that 'the expressionist, abstract aesthetic of illustration is increasingly seen as a fresh, more subtle – and attention-grabbing – alternative to computer graphics and photography'. ('Sketch show', 29 June 2003.) In the same piece, Alice Rawsthorn, director of London's Design

Museum, commented, 'It's part of the general trend towards a richer, more romantic aesthetic. We're yearning for the individuality of hand-drawing at a time when our lives are more automated.'

For now, though, the yearning seems to have passed. Although fashion illustration has rightfully regained the respect it had lost over the previous decades, it is unlikely to replace photography as the medium of choice for fashion branding.

Fashion photographers, in any case, often take their cues from artists. Although Vincent Peters' work is frequently artistic – his prize-winning 2002 ad for Dior's Poison scent, for instance, was a painstaking recreation of a 19th-century Gothic illustration – he sees no contradiction in using his skills for commercial purposes. 'Quite honestly, when I was involved in the art scene, I found it more superficial and pretentious [than fashion]. Again, I don't think people realize how much effort we put in to what we do. The people I work with have a real appreciation of beauty. It's something of a paradox. When you shoot a fashion picture, whether for an ad or a magazine, you're trying to create something beautiful. That depends, of course, on what your concept of beauty is, and we all have different sources we're feeding off. My own are quite classical, because my mother was an art teacher and I take a lot of inspiration from paintings.'

He adds that, in any case, great art has often been commercial: 'Look at Renaissance painters, or look at Mozart: their best work was commissioned by wealthy patrons.'

# 9

# This year's model

*'A fashion picture is never a picture of a dress – it's a picture of the woman who wears it.'*

'I can be whatever you want me to be,' Gisele Bündchen told the US edition of *Esquire* magazine in October 2004. 'If you want me to be the sexy girl, I can do that. If you want me to be the weird girl, I can do that. And if you want me to be the classically beautiful girl, I can do that too.'

The word 'supermodel' sounds a bit tired these days, but it's difficult to find a more appropriate term for Gisele. Somewhere between goddess and pin-up, these women are prized by designers, brands and magazines as the perfect denizens of fashion's fantasy land. 'Almost every other model looks ugly when you stand her next to Gisele,' says the photographer Vincent Peters. 'Gisele is a star – she's an action movie. But sometimes, you want a relationship movie.'

Peters confirms that choosing a model is part of the branding process. 'Most models have a precise image that either works for the brand or it doesn't. Some of them are more couture, others are sexy. . . And it's important to get that right for the shoot. [Art director] Alexey Brodovitch said, "A fashion picture is never a picture of a dress – it's a picture of the woman who wears it." When you're doing a fashion shoot, you're creating characters.'

Models have existed for as long as there have been fashion brands. Worth used first his wife and then other women to model his designs; Poiret followed the pattern. In early editions of *Vogue*, dresses were worn by wealthy socialites – although they were gradually replaced by 'normal' girls. For many years, models were little more than clothes-horses, as their glacial expressions and disdainful poses suggested. Although some of them became famous within their profession, they were not 'stars' in the sense that many of them are today.

The London of the 1960s changed all that. Young photographers like Terence Donovan and David Bailey began to take pictures of girls in a manner that suggested there might be more interesting things going on when the shooting stopped – and there usually was. In Michael Gross's compelling (1995) book on the subject, *Model: The Ugly Business of Beautiful Women*, Donovan is quoted as saying that, until he and Bailey came along, 'in England all fashion photographers were gay'. Donovan says this was important because, as a straight bloke, he feared he didn't understand how clothes and jewellery worked together: 'And then suddenly you realized. . . all you had to do was take a strong picture of a girl.'

Bailey, meanwhile, shot stunning pictures of a girl he had fallen in love with – Jean Shrimpton, rechristened 'The Shrimp' by the tabloid press. 'She and Bailey became the archetypes of a new breed of photographers and fashion models,' writes Gross. 'By letting the heat of their sexual relationship into their pictures, by letting their models seem touchable. . . they transformed themselves into fashion's first real celebrities outside fashion.'

But Swinging London's most famous model stood at a distance from the frenzy going on around her. Lesley Hornby, a sweet girl from Neasden, was initially represented not by a modelling agency, but by her mentor and boyfriend Justin de Villeneuve. Her colt-like frame, all arms and legs, earned her the nickname 'Twig', which evolved into 'Twiggy'. When she let a hairdresser use her as a model for a new style – a short, elfin cut that emphasized her enormous blue eyes – her future was assured. She climbed quickly from the pages of the *Daily Express* to *Elle* and *Vogue*. Soon, clothing brands and car manufacturers were beating a path to her door with offers of sponsorship deals. Gross writes, 'She wasn't a model like any before her; she was a marketing miracle. . . the first model to achieve genuine international celebrity.'

But Twiggy earned only a fraction of the sums that were reaped by the stars who followed her. Kate Moss, discovered by the Storm agency in 1988 as a Croydon schoolgirl, is often compared to Twiggy. At the beginning of her career she was described as a 'waif'; and although she had been championed by iconic style magazine *The Face*, her rise to global fame was due to a landmark series of ads shot by Patrick Demarchelier for Calvin Klein's CK brand. It was the first time CK's young target consumers had seen a model with whom they could identify, somebody who – although pretty – might conceivably live around the corner.

Long after the waif era has faded into fashion's distant past, Moss has proved her adaptability. Her streetwise looks were instrumental in winning Burberry a new, young audience. The Moss style has proved as suited to the elegance of Chanel as it is to the accessible cosmetics brand Rimmel. A *W* magazine article about the Moss phenomenon suggests that her human imperfections – the scattering of freckles and ever-so-slightly crooked smile that offset her lofty cheekbones and pouting mouth – have enabled young women across the globe to identify with her. The photographer Inez Van Lamsweerde describes her as 'a generation's muse'; while the artist Alex Katz – who painted her portrait for a *W* cover – says, 'She's completely ordinary. That's what makes her so extraordinary.' In the same piece, Tom Sachs explains why he chose to photograph her in the setting of a fast-food restaurant: 'Of course her face is a brand – she's a commodity.' ('All about Kate', *W*, September 2003.)

Models grow used to regarding themselves as commodities, to expressing a set of values that can be utilized by marketers. At the beginning of Gross's book, Cindy Crawford tells him, 'I see myself as a president of a company that owns a product, Cindy Crawford, that everybody wants. So I'm not powerless because I own that product. When you start thinking that your agency owns it and you don't own it, you have a problem.'

## PACKAGING BEAUTY

It's not my intention here to explore the seamier side of the modelling business, which is thoroughly described in Gross's book. (Milan, particularly, is portrayed as a morass, in which playboys circle

modelling agencies like sharks.) Perhaps the profession's darkest hour was the aftermath of investigative journalist Donal MacIntyre's BBC documentary about agencies in 1999. As part of the series *MacIntyre Undercover*, the reporter used an array of bugging devices to present an industry riddled with sexual predators and drug abuse. There were recriminations and legal action – but by then the programme had confirmed what many members of the public already suspected.

The subsequent poor image of modelling agencies upsets John Horner, managing director of UK agency Models 1. 'I deplore the way the industry is represented by the media,' he says. 'In the UK, we have one of the most professional businesses in the world. [Internationally] the industry is badly let down by a few grubby agencies that sully its reputation. Most of the UK agencies are managed by women, so they're not the ones doing the damage. And men in the business have a responsibility to behave professionally. You have to be protective – I mean, most of the time these are young, vulnerable kids. When we send them to shoots in Italy – which even within the business has a poor reputation – we make sure that they are professionally chaperoned. Often their parents go with them.'

Horner, particularly, understands the value of models to marketers – after all, he worked in advertising for more than 30 years. He started out in 1965, wrapping parcels stuffed with promotional products at an agency called Dorlands. Over the years he went on to work for some of the most famous agencies in the ad industry – including Leo Burnett and J. Walter Thompson – start two businesses, sell both of them at a profit, and play a key role in high-profile mergers. In 1998 he began advising the two head bookers (modelling-speak for agents) at Models 1, Karen Diamond and Kathy Pryer, who had been offered a management buy-out by the agency's founders.

'Gradually they realized that they didn't have the necessary business skills; they weren't sure how to raise the money or write a business plan. But the future [of the agency] looked bright enough, so we did what is unfortunately called a BIMBO – a buy-in management buy-out – because I joined the team by buying into the business. And so, in January 1999, I became a model agent.'

Horner says that, as the managing director of the business, he works behind the scenes. 'On arrival, I did exactly what you'd expect a marketing guy to do, which was to re-establish the brand identity. Obviously we had a great brand name, because the agency had been

going for 35 years. It also had a number of brand values, which I kept and strengthened. It's very important that we behave correctly as an agency – that's a key part of our positioning. We pay our models on time, there's no misbehaving or impropriety whatsoever. It's absolutely vital that we are second to none in that regard. It's an interesting challenge because you have to reassure the parents [of teenage models] while making the brand funky enough to appeal to youngsters too.'

Models 1 has an illustrious history. Founded in 1968, it has played an instrumental role in the careers of models such as Twiggy, Jerry Hall, Yasmin Le Bon and current favourite Karen Elson. Today it's the biggest model agency brand in the UK (in competition with Select) and has a database of 7,000 clients, some 2,000 of which are active. International clients count for 25 per cent of the business. The operation is divided into four divisions: women, men, new faces and classic. The 'classic' division handles personalities – notably Patsy Kensit and Faye Dunaway – and established or mature models. 'New faces' is obviously looking for beginners.

While he was working on the brand repositioning – a process that involved, among other things, interviewing key clients and every single member of staff – Horner discovered that the agency was known as 'reputable, but a bit dusty'. 'We had to make the place a little more dynamic. We wanted to become exciting enough so that youngsters would aspire to being part of Models 1. At the time, our new faces division was not doing as well as it should have been. It was one of the reasons we relocated from the wrong end of the King's Road to the heart of London [in offices near Covent Garden].'

Horner points out that, because the fashion industry thrives on novelty, attracting fresh faces is critical to the performance of a modelling agency. With this in mind, Models 1 ran a press relations campaign targeting the youth media, organizing a number of events that brought together journalists, photographers and representatives of the new faces division. The result is that now, when schoolgirls dream about becoming a top model, Models 1 is again among the agencies they consider approaching.

Modelling agencies are also famous for their 'scouts', the talent-spotters who cruise the gathering places of adolescents, as well as constantly keeping their eyes peeled for suitable candidates. Horner admits that this is by no means his field. 'I don't have an eye – but fortunately my job is to run the business rather than to find models. It's

very instinctive: a scout "knows" when somebody has potential. We're not after a particular look – it's rare that we set out to find a redhead or a quirky look or whatever. We don't create trends. The photographers do that.'

Whether a walk-in or one of the scouts' finds, the potential model is invited to the agency, always with a parent or guardian. Polaroid photos are taken, after which the agency's experts debate the candidate's potential. If a genuine talent is thought to be present, test photography is done. On the basis of the results, a decision is made.

Models are not expected to contract to the agency for their entire working life, or even for a set period. They sign an agreement that they will not work with any rival UK outfits, but as their career develops they are free to fire their existing agency at any time. Horner says, 'If you think about it, we're taking on youngsters between 16 and 18, mothering them, looking after their careers, so the relationship between model and booker becomes very close. For them to change agencies is quite a wrench.'

In the earliest days of their new career, the young saplings are sent on 'go-sees' – they show their face at magazines and meet photographers with the hope of being hired for a shoot. For those who live outside London, the agency keeps a 'model flat', sleeping six at a time for two- or three-night periods. ('They always wreck the place,' jokes Horner. 'Don't forget – they're teenagers.') The newcomers stay in the new faces division for up to a year before moving on to what is called 'the main board'. There is also a separate 'image' division for what Horner calls 'high-profile, fast-track models' – the kind who end up in *Vogue*. But what outsiders don't realize is that they may be better off working for catalogues.

'A fast-track model can burn out quickly, sometimes inexplicably – she has such a strong image that she goes out of fashion. A bread-and-butter model working for catalogues and mainstream brands can have a solid career for years. And the simple fact is that *Vogue* only pays about £75 a day. Working for the fashion media in general, you'll only earn a maximum of £350 for a shoot. But the media know it's important for the model's career, because then she might get access to a big brand name.'

And that's when the bigger fees start – not only because the model is expected to commit to the brand for a long period of time, 'but also because she is contributing to that brand's essence'. Horner agrees that

the right model can transform the fortunes of a brand. He cites the example of Christy Turlington, who became the face of the cosmetics brand Maybelline in the United States (a contract said to be worth £1.8 million a year).

A brand in its own right, Models 1 is among the best known in the fashion industry. 'In the client community, awareness is as high as it could be. But of course we keep in constant contact with our clients, by mail and telephone. My advertising background means I know roughly when clients are going to start thinking about their next campaigns. We make appointments to go and see them. Alternatively, they may ring us to say they are casting for a project, so we send them cards [photographs and statistics] either by mail or online. Each model also has a book of photographs that is constantly updated.'

The agency has about 2,000 models on its books, with a nucleus of 600 who get a steady turnover of work. The decision about which model to use can be made by various parties: the advertising agency, the art director, the photographer or the client, depending on the situation. Often, it's the photographer – and their choices can make or break careers.

Mathilde Plet, in charge of casting models at the French magazine *Numéro*, has cited celebrated photographer Steven Meisel as one of the greatest talent-spotters in the business. 'His mastery of fashion gives him an enormous influence with the agencies,' she said. (*Le Monde* magazine supplement, 20–21 June 2004.) Meisel played a key role in the 'supermodel' phenomenon, shooting Christy Turlington, Naomi Campbell and Linda Evangelista.

John Horner comments, 'Photography is a deceptive process. You can look at a girl and think "she's going to make it", but the photographs tell a different story: exaggerating a jaw, making a nose look too big. The camera is the ultimate judge.'

## PERFECTION AND IMPERFECTION

'We don't wake up for less than $10,000 a day,' Linda Evangelista famously told *Vogue* in 1991. The quote was the defining phrase of the supermodel era, when the clothes faded into the background and the women wearing them became stars. Things are different now. Fees have settled down – for most models they were never that high in the

first place. Dawn Wolf, of the agency IMG/France, told *Le Monde*, ‘I’ve never read an article about the price of models that was right.’

Linda Evangelista is now on the books of Models 1, although agency boss John Horner agrees that the supermodel craze has faded. ‘Versace really put supermodels on the map. He decided he’d pay whatever it took to get the best models, which started the whole inflation process. Eventually, though, they became too expensive. It began to be debatable whether they added enough value to the brand in relation to the price the advertiser was paying.’

But Horner also hints that, in terms of sheer professionalism, those few supermodels might have been worth it. ‘We did a campaign with Linda Evangelista for Wallis, and it was as much about us selling her to Wallis as it was about the brand wanting a model of that calibre. They did the shoot in America. Normally you do a test day, with a fitting and so forth. But in this case they just turned up with the clothes, and she’s such an amazing model that the second they were on, they looked a million dollars. Erin O’Connor is another one: quite unusual-looking, very tall; but the second you put a garment on that girl, she’s instantly into model mode.’

Cindy Crawford calls her model persona ‘The Thing’. The writer Michael Gross describes the process as follows: ‘She fluffs her hair and strikes a pose, and suddenly The Thing is in the room.’ Crawford tells him, ‘I’m becoming this other character, and all of a sudden – I don’t know why – all of a sudden I’m brave, I’m telling jokes, I become much more theatrical… and then I wash it off.’

Perhaps it takes a bit of pantomime to create a fairy-tale. Horner dislikes the term ‘clothes-horse’, but admits that models play the role of a blank canvas. ‘They are there to interpret and enhance a product. The more flexible their face or body, the more easily they can create a distinctive image for the client.’

How much digital trickery goes into moulding that image is open to debate. Horner says that the very best photographers disdain re-touching, as they can achieve the desired effect through lighting, make-up and their own skill. But he admits that cosmetics advertisers and fashion magazines remove blemishes with a few judicious clicks of the mouse.

One of the things a computer can’t change is ethnicity. The pages of fashion magazines are far more cosmopolitan (no pun intended) than they used to be, but black models are still a comparative rarity. Veronica

Webb, Grace Jones, Iman, Naomi Campbell, Waris Dirie and Alek Wek are memorable partly because they broke through the barrier. According to one fashion journalist, who wishes to remain anonymous, 'It's simple practicality. When you put a model on the cover of a magazine, you're promoting cosmetics as well as clothes. And if most of your readers are white, they want to identify with that image. The black community has its own fashion magazines.'

Yet L'Oreal has chosen Noémie Lenoir (who is also on the books of Models 1, along with Iman) as one of its faces, while Ethiopian beauty Liya Kebede is representing Estée Lauder alongside Carolyn Murphy and Elizabeth Hurley. 'The European market is opening up and following the American example,' said Vicky Mihaci of Ford Models' Paris office. 'In 2004 we noticed a growing demand for black models for the collections, when previously only Yves Saint Laurent systematically used them.' ('*Où sont passés les mannequins noirs*?', *Stratégies*, 28 October 2004.)

Colour is one thing – but how about shape? In the same way that fashion models are young for practical reasons (energy, clear eyes, smooth skin), they are also skinny. When designers create clothes for their collections, they make items in one size. Therefore, models also come in a standard size. And the received opinion is that a dress is flattered by a slender frame. But John Horner strongly refutes allegations that modelling provokes eating disorders. 'Anorexia begins before modelling. We have never had an anorexic model on our books, and if we believe somebody may be veering in that direction, we send them away to get help. If models are skinny, it's often because they're born that way. They eat perfectly healthy meals. We even considered putting paid to the myth by producing a book called *Model Food*, in which they'd list all their favourite recipes. Of course, if they get overweight, they don't work. But we certainly don't want them to be all skin and bone. Some photographers like fuller figures.'

Yet various groups, from the British Medical Association to the National Eating Disorders Association in the United States (whose public face is the former model Carré Otis), have expressed concern that fashion magazines promote unrealistic body shapes. It's a case of supply and demand. In the Western world, where a growing percentage of the population is officially obese, slenderness has become idealized.

Horner observes that an agency must have, within reason, models of all shapes, sizes and racial backgrounds on its books: 'And even ages.

Some models have a short working life, often because they decide to pursue other careers or raise families. But Yasmin Le Bon has been working for 20-odd years. We also have a model called Daphne Selfe, who is in her 70s. [She featured in a Dolce & Gabbana campaign.] There is a market for different types of look.'

Lately, though, fashion brands have been favouring well-known faces over the blank canvas of models. Celebrities, while not always perfect, are undeniably powerful.