

Accessorize all areas

‘The handbag is killing fashion.’

Downstairs, at a reasonably safe distance from where I am standing, a large man is waving one hand at me and making disturbing throat-slashing gestures with the other. In different circumstances, I might be concerned. However, I’m not in a Naples back alley; I’m standing on the mezzanine floor of the Armani superstore in Milan. The man is a security guard, and his urgent signals mean that I should stop taking photographs of the store’s interior. No doubt he’s worried that I’ll do something unforgivable like publish them in a book destined to be read by potential Armani customers.

Pictures taken, I stow away the camera and wave amiably back at the security operative. He seems satisfied and leaves me to my shopping.

As well as being a Spartan, eye-achingly white example of the kind of flagship luxury store discussed in Chapter 5, the three-floor Armani space at Via Manzoni 31 is the perfect illustration of another familiar ingredient of fashion: the brand extension. In this single store, customers can sample almost every declination of the Armani brand: Emporio Armani (upmarket young fashion); Armani Jeans (casual wear); Armani Casa (home furnishings); Armani Profumi (fragrances); Armani Dolci (chocolates); and even Armani Fiori (flowers). Just about the only Armani product you can’t experience here is the label’s first hotel, which is due to open in Dubai by 2008.

A little while later, at Armani's headquarters around the corner in Via Borgonuovo, Robert Triefus, the company's executive vice-president of worldwide communications, explains the thinking behind such diverse branding initiatives: 'The Armani brand and its values have become understood globally. When you talk about Armani to someone on the street, they immediately have a perception of what the name means. It has almost become generic – you can talk about the "Armani look": Italian, timeless, elegant, sophisticated but understated. That concept extends very smoothly into lifestyle products, and it did so in 2000 when we launched Armani Casa.'

Unlike the Gucci and LVMH groups, which have expanded by acquiring existing brands, Armani has created its own sub-brands and diversified into new product categories, creating a coherent 'branded environment'. Triefus says the group is built like a pyramid, with the signature Giorgio Armani brand at the top 'setting the tone and style for everything that we do'. When the company moves into a new market, it always opens a Giorgio Armani boutique first, to set the standard, before any of the other brands follow. Beneath the signature brand is Armani Collezioni, a slightly more accessible diffusion line predominantly distributed through department stores; it is followed, in descending order, by Emporio Armani, Armani Jeans, and A/X Armani Exchange, a series of licensed casual-wear stores not a million miles from Gap in style. Each of these labels also markets accessories such as eyewear, watches and fragrances, produced through licensing arrangements. Although licensing was once deemed unfashionable – in the 1990s many luxury companies spent a fortune buying back licences, feeling that over-extension had corrupted the integrity of their brands – it is now sneaking back into favour. Certainly, Armani's brand-stretching does not seem to have hurt the company, which turns over 4 billion in annual retail sales, according to Triefus.

'You should be aware that the store you have just seen is a very particular environment that offered the opportunity to do some peripheral things. Armani Dolci [the chocolates spin-off] is a very small business with two or three stores in the entire world, but it works in terms of creating an addition to the Armani lifestyle in certain retail locations. The same is true of the flowers – we're not trying to compete with Interflora. Having said that, although "lifestyle" is an overused expression, I think we have been more successful than most in creating an identity that can be interpreted in diverse forms.'

The flowers and the chocolates may be peripheral, but Armani Casa is a real business, with 17 stores around the world. And the hotel operation will eventually have 14 branded locations.

‘Of course you’re going to ask me if we’re in danger of over-extending, but I don’t believe anything we have done has gone beyond the logic of the brand. It’s when you go beyond the brand’s logic that things start to look uncertain,’ says Triefus. ‘That was the problem with licences. Pierre Cardin is famous for the amount of licensing agreements he has. We have four licensing agreements worldwide. We’re a very tightly controlled business, so I don’t think we can be accused of pushing the brand too far.’

Armani is not the first brand to move into interiors – Ralph Lauren, the king of ‘lifestyle’ marketing, got in on the act around 15 years ago – but Triefus says, ‘Along with Lauren, we’ve probably taken the most comprehensive approach. Other brands like Versace, Calvin Klein, Fendi and Donna Karan have taken a more tangential route – I refer to it as “candles and cushions” – while we have the full gamut of furniture, lighting, rugs, sheets, tableware and so forth, so it’s a genuine opportunity to buy in to the Armani world.’

Brand extensions are all the rage in Italy, it seems. Rosita Missoni, having decided to leave fashion to the younger designers in her company, has launched a range of home products – and may even open Missoni-branded interiors stores. Meanwhile, Pucci, the Florentine fashion house majority-owned by the LVMH group, has produced winter sportswear in partnership with Rossignol. Pucci’s glamorous, kaleidoscopically colourful prints rocketed definitively back into fashion when Nicole Kidman wore a red, pink and gold dress at the Cannes Film Festival a couple of years ago. Emilio Pucci died in 1992 and the designer behind the label is now Christian Lacroix (eminently suited to the task), while Pucci’s daughter Laudomia is its ‘image director’. Pucci was well known for putting his trademark print on everything from curtains to carpets (the Apollo 15 crew carried a Pucci-designed flag to the moon), and in 2001 the label launched a range of furniture in association with Cappellini. But while a Pucci ski jacket certainly stands out on the slopes, isn’t it – to paraphrase Triefus – moving beyond the logic of the brand?

Certainly not, says Laudomia. She points out that her father ‘lived on the slopes’ (he was a member of the Italian skiing team), adding that his very first designs were skiing outfits. ‘Pucci comes from a

sportswear background, which is very important to point out in terms of legitimacy. We are merely going back to our roots. We have always been a lifestyle company.'

Pucci even created a one-off 300-square-metre sail for a racing yacht, perfectly underlining, says Laudomia, 'that we're Mediterranean and we're all about colour'. Sportswear seems to be a legitimate arena for high-fashion brands, with Céline, Chanel, Dior, Hugo Boss, Prada Sport and Versace Sport all venturing onto the ski slopes and beyond (Chanel has even made a branded snowboard).

The lure of brand extensions for fashion labels is obvious, given the many purposes they serve. They can be money-spinners in their own right, public relations tools for drawing attention to the brand (I mean, really, a Chanel snowboard?), or part of an overall branding strategy – another molecule in the brand universe.

But what happens when the relationship between clothing and accessories is reversed? Have clothes simply become promotional tools for branded goods?

EMOTIONAL BAGGAGE

French fashion journalist Janie Samet believes designers' insistence on brand extensions has led to a declining interest in their clothes, and fuelled the success of affordable fashion brands like Zara, H&M and Topshop.

'Naturally, [the designer labels] are keen on accessories because they provide greater profit margins,' she says. 'And customers like them because no matter what else you are wearing, if you have the right bag, you are immediately placed in a certain social context. The problem is that if you have the right bag, the right shoes and the right belt, you may decide that you no longer need the right dress. In this way, the success of bags is killing fashion.'

But fashion and handbags lead a symbiotic existence. While Dior stages fashion shows that are arguably advertising campaigns for its accessories, brands such as Hermès, Prada and Louis Vuitton began making luxury accessories, and then moved into fashion. The clothes that Marc Jacobs creates for Louis Vuitton are – like Armani's flowers and chocolates – part of a branded world. From Bottega Veneta to Loewe via Dunhill, ST Dupont and Asprey, selling accessories is no longer

enough – a designer brand must touch every aspect of its customers' lives.

Louis Vuitton recently celebrated its 150th birthday, but its products are apparently as desirable as ever. Hours before the opening of its flagship store on the Champs-Élysées, dozens of Japanese tourists stand in line, convinced they will be able to acquire a prized monogrammed item at a fraction of the price they would pay in Tokyo. Other Asian visitors are here to buy bags that will later form the templates for fakes. Louis Vuitton, it almost goes without saying, is the Coca-Cola of baggage brands.

Louis Vuitton himself was born in 1821 in a small French village not far from the border with Switzerland. He grew into a natural craftsman, skilfully handling the tools of his father, a joiner. Legend has it that the ambitious young Louis walked 250 miles from his home to Paris, where he became an apprentice at a packing-case maker near the Madeleine. The age of international travel was dawning, with railway lines extending their steel fingers across France, and the first steamers traversing the Atlantic. Their wealthy passengers required a great deal of luggage – the more elegant the better. Spying a growing market, Louis Vuitton decided to start his own business.

Vuitton's first commercial premises opened in 1854 on the Rue Neuve-des-Capucines, not far from the Place Vendôme – and thus close to a steady influx of rich clients. His stroke of genius was to upholster his cases not in leather, but in durable waterproofed canvas. The classic Vuitton trunk was a glamorous monster. Made of poplar, encased in canvas, strengthened with black lacquered metal corners, it bristled with brackets, handles and crosspieces, and contained myriad trays, compartments and drawers. It was a portable wardrobe, and it was a big hit. By 1888 the design had become so widely copied that Vuitton was forced to print his surname on the canvas at regular intervals. From then on, the name Louis Vuitton was indivisibly associated with stylish travel.

Vuitton was undoubtedly an innovator (his inventions included the round 'chauffeur bag', which fitted into the centre of a pile of spare tyres; the 'aero trunk', which floated in the event of a landing on water; and the 'secrétaire trunk'; a mobile writing desk), but it was his son Georges who contributed the logo that still causes all the fuss today. He designed a monogram pattern consisting of an encircled four-petal flower, a lozenge containing a four-pointed star, the same star

in negative, and the initials LV, in homage to his father. The pattern is said to have been inspired by Japanese prints, which perhaps in part explains the brand's immense appeal in that market today.

Georges also created the 'Keep-all', a light canvas bag that was originally designed to contain dirty linen, and to be packed into the trunk. But it was adopted as an accessory in its own right – the first Louis Vuitton bag that voyagers kept by their side. As the years rolled on and new generations of Vuittons headed the company, its bags grew smaller and softer. At first, the family struggled to find ways of printing the monogram logo on flexible surfaces. The arrival of plastic in the late 1950s changed all that, and Louis Vuitton bags became available in all shapes and sizes. Now the iconic logo remains, and the old, original steamer trunks are collectors' items that occasionally double as coffee tables.

In 1987, Louis Vuitton merged with Moët and Hennessy. Enter Bernard Arnault, who would equip LVMH for the 21st century. Born in 1949 in Roubaix, France, Arnault was a graduate of the elite *École Polytechnique* in Paris. After pursuing a successful career in real estate in New York, he returned to France to apply his American-style business savvy to the country's oldest and most conservative industries: couture, Champagne and luxury goods. Arnault and a business partner from the French bank Lazard Frères and Co. raised US\$80 million to buy Boussac, the textile firm that owned the Christian Dior fashion house. In 1987, Arnault was invited by Henri Recamier, the chairman of LVMH, to invest in the company. Two years later, Arnault took full control; becoming the holder of the key to what would become the world's largest luxury conglomerate.

According to Arnault's communications advisor, Jean-Jacques Picart, the secret of Louis Vuitton's continuing success was the fusion of luxury goods with fashion: 'Monsieur Arnault invented what might be called "*luxe-mode*". He devised a way of persuading customers that a luxury item was a fashion statement, and therefore needed to be renewed or replaced. In effect, he introduced the concepts of experimentation, fluidity and renewal that characterize fashion into the world of luxury products, which are by nature timeless and long-lasting.'

Arnault did this in 1997 by appointing Marc Jacobs as Louis Vuitton's artistic director. A young, acclaimed American fashion designer (he had already been named Women's Designer of the Year three times by the Council of Fashion Designers of America), Jacobs was about to open

his own store in New York. Hiring a hip New Yorker to pump fresh blood into a venerable Parisian luggage firm was a typically audacious Arnault gamble. A year later, Louis Vuitton launched a range of clothing, shoes and jewellery. That same year, not at all coincidentally, it opened the first of its 'global stores' on the Champs-Élysées. Although it had existing retail outlets (more than 300 around the world), the Champs-Élysées store was the blueprint for a series of giant spaces, the largest of which have opened in Tokyo and New York. In 1912, the very first Louis Vuitton store in Paris covered some 500 square metres. The New York store offers 1,200 square metres of floor space.

Under Jacobs, the monogram pattern was transformed into graffiti (in 2001) and became multicoloured (in 2003) thanks to collaborations with artists Stephen Sprouse and Takashi Murakami. Jacobs also deployed print advertising to modernize Louis Vuitton's image: first by using well-known models such as Eva Herzigova and Naomi Campbell; later by recruiting popular-culture celebrities such as Jennifer Lopez, Scarlett Johansson and Uma Thurman. The images themselves have the gloss, superficiality and sexuality of contemporary fashion photography, owing little or nothing to Louis Vuitton's 'luxury travel' heritage.

Corinne Perez, managing director of the advertising agency BETC Luxe (part of the larger Euro RSCG group), which works alongside Jacobs for Louis Vuitton, says, 'The group's roots are clearly in luggage and travel, but since the arrival of Marc Jacobs it has a strong core of fashion, entirely created and driven by him. He succeeded in making contemporary and relevant a brand that had always been powerful, but within a very specific frame. He took the name Louis Vuitton, which incarnated a certain elegant style of living, detached it from the narrow field of luxury travel, and created around it an idea of pleasure and sensuality.'

For Perez, the campaign featuring Jennifer Lopez was the ultimate expression of Jacobs' ability to meld the apparently conflicting worlds of MTV and luxury. 'It was a controversial campaign because many people felt it would degrade the image of the brand. But Jennifer Lopez incarnates a certain notion of social achievement and wealth, as well as passion and sexuality. I think the campaign expressed the transformative power of the brand: the Jennifer Lopez we saw in those images was not just a pop star, but a sophisticated and glamorous being.'

Since Jacobs' arrival, Louis Vuitton has also moved into menswear and launched a range of watches. But alongside its more fashionable

endeavours, it quietly maintains a series of branding initiatives that lie closer to its roots: the Louis Vuitton Classic car rally; the Louis Vuitton Cup yacht race; and a series of upmarket city guides and travel books. Even if Jacobs sends eccentric items on to the catwalk or creates blatantly youth-oriented advertising campaigns, in the background Vuitton keeps its traditional values polished and ready for re-appropriation when necessary.

There is a certain similarity between Louis Vuitton and that other Parisian luxury-goods house, Hermès. But Hermès is determined to retain the air of unabashed elitism that Vuitton has played down in favour of seducing the mass market. Hermès is refined and more than a little haughty. It pushes hard on terms such as ‘hand-crafted’ and ‘artisans’. But Hermès wants to be hip, too, and hired Jean-Paul Gaultier to design its prêt-à-porter collection in 2003, as well as taking a stake in his business. Gaultier replaced the enigmatic Martin Margiela, who had been with Hermès since 1998.

Hermès started out as a saddler in 1837, and still uses equine imagery in its branding. Thierry Hermès made harnesses and saddles for the fashionable horse-drawn buggies (*calèches* and *fiacres*) that clopped along the boulevards of 19th-century Paris. Fortunately for the company, future generations of the Hermès family saw the automobile coming. Emile-Maurice Hermès diversified into luggage, hand-stitched leather goods, gloves and silk scarves. (The world-famous Hermès Carré silk scarf was said to have derived from the fabric used for jockeys’ caps.) Watchbands and jewellery followed. In 1951, Robert Dumas took over from his father-in-law, and proved to have a strong grasp of marketing techniques. It was during this era that the brand launched its logo (a *calèche*, naturally) and its signature orange colour, and the window displays at its headquarters in Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré became increasingly opulent. Hermès goods were sought after by celebrities; something that the house encouraged by naming a bag after the actress Grace Kelly. The Kelly bag became a cult object, and a Birkin bag, in homage to the singer Jane Birkin, followed later.

The company’s current president, Jean-Louis Dumas, took over in 1978. With a turnover of around €1.3 billion a year, the company (which is still 75 per cent family-owned) gains around 40 per cent of its profits from leather goods, with the rest deriving from clothing and accessories, silk, watches, perfume and tableware. It has more than 200 boutiques around the world, including a glass tower in Tokyo that offers

not only the full range of Hermès goods, but also regular screenings of French films. Gaultier's first prêt-à-porter collection for the house featured cheeky ponytails, cavalry coats and delightfully perverse harnesses and riding boots.

Jean-Louis Dumas insists that 'Hermès is not a fashion house. It preserves a certain distance while at the same time being determined to remain contemporary. The notion of permanence gives us an aristocratic distinction which has, we must admit, an intimidating side.' (*Hermès: L'oeil du maître*, *Le Point*, 8 April 2004.)

Nevertheless, Hermès has plenty of the attributes of a fashion business – notably an interest in fragrances. The current Eau des Merveilles is the latest in a long line that began in the 1950s with Eau d'Hermès, followed by Calèche, Equipage, Amazone, Bel Ami, Eau d'Orange Verte and 24 Faubourg. Janie Samet, who is as realistic about fragrances as she is about bags, comments, 'Perfumes are the heart of the luxury war. Scent makes the cash registers ring.'

A BRAND IN A BOTTLE

Fragrances are the interface between the general public and the world of luxury. Even the most expensive scent is well within the reach of the average consumer, who, while baulking at the cost of a Chanel evening dress, may decide to splash out on a bottle of No. 5. According to market research company Mintel, perfumes and cosmetics make up 37 per cent of the US\$70-billion global luxury goods market; clothes and leather goods account for 42 per cent.

Michael D'Arminio, a marketing consultant who has worked on beauty products and fragrances within the Unilever group, says, 'I've been in this field for nearly 12 years, and I have never worked with a designer who said they were just in it for the cash. However, it is 100 per cent about building the brand, communicating its values, and opening up that brand to a larger customer base. The price points within the designer fashion market continue to increase, so fragrances and cosmetics make those brands more accessible and help to build a designer's business. Clearly there are royalties at the end of it, but the process is much more subtle than "take the money and run".'

Fragrances are rarely, if ever, developed by designers alone. Instead, they are produced under licence by large beauty companies such as

L’Oreal or Unilever. Designers have neither the expertise nor the budgets to create, manufacture, distribute and market perfumes.

D’Arminio suggests that the gestation period for a fragrance is between 15 months and two years. ‘Developing a fragrance and bringing it to market is a lengthy and incredibly expensive task,’ he stresses. ‘Normally you look to turn a profit two or three years out. Up until that time, you’re still paying for the groundwork. In the United States, if you want to go into the department store market and be a top-15 player, you’re looking at spending between eight and fifteen million dollars on a launch. Then you can add another eight or ten million for Europe. And the figures I’ve just given you are purely for media spend – I haven’t included all the development costs.’

For this reason, creating a fragrance is a delicate business. The result has to be fashionable, but not a flash in the pan. It should reflect the brand’s values, without being overly complex. Ultimately, no matter whose name is on the bottle, it’s the juice that’s being judged. And as an unsuccessful fragrance can be de-listed, ultimately damaging the parent brand, designers tend to monitor the development of their perfumes very carefully. ‘In my experience,’ says D’Arminio, ‘the designer is involved at every stage, from beginning to end. It’s like a marriage.’

This is confirmed by Valérie Sanchez, who is currently international marketing manager for Helena Rubinstein skincare products at L’Oreal, but has worked on fragrance brands for Rochas, Cacharel and, most recently, Giorgio Armani. At the time I met her, she had just helped Armani launch his male fragrance, Black Code.

She says, ‘Our job is to translate the spirit of a brand into a fragrance, so it’s essential that we work hand-in-hand with the designer. Working on projects for Armani, we would travel to Milan to meet with him at least once a month. The designer respects the fact that perfume is our *métier* and not his, but he still demands, and gets, full control.’

Before the odour comes the name. Both D’Arminio and Sanchez confirm that this is chosen at the very beginning of the process. Devising a name for a perfume is increasingly troublesome, because many of the most poetic words and phrases in English, French and Italian are already owned by somebody. This is another incentive to work with a large company such as L’Oreal to develop a perfume – as the leading company in the worldwide beauty market it has the firepower to purchase almost any name. Another alternative is to register a combination name, like Flower By Kenzo or Cerruti Sí, for instance. Often, designers are

asked to provide lists of potential names. But Sanchez says that Black Code came out of a brainstorming process at L’Oreal.

‘The concept for the fragrance was inspired by a midnight-blue Armani tuxedo that Denzel Washington wore to the Oscars. So we were looking for words around “ceremony”, “black tie” and “dress code”. “Black Tie” was not international enough: although English is now regarded as the international language of marketing, we felt some nationalities might have problem with the word “tie”. So we shuffled things around a bit and ended up with Black Code.’

The fragrance itself is a team effort involving the designer, the licensing company, and a fragrance house. There are only a handful of fragrance houses in the world, and every scent on the market has been designed by one of them. The most famous are IFF (International Flavours & Fragrances), Firmenich, Givaudan, Haarman & Reimer, Takasago, Quest International and Sensient Technologies. As well as fragrances, they conjure up aromas for food companies (yes, your yoghurt smells of strawberries because somebody has perfumed it). The people who work at these houses combine the talents of chemist, musician and wine-taster.

Valérie Sanchez explains, ‘Contrary to what you might have read in Patrick Suskind’s novel *Perfume, les nez* [the “noses”] are not born with their talent. They may have an interest or an aptitude, but, like musicians, they are educated in their art. Odours are like musical notes – but they are also like molecules, which work together in different ways. Perfume is a science as much as it is an art. Each “nose” works with a palette of between 300 and 500 scents, which they constantly smell to keep the odours fresh in their memory. The variations are infinite. We know that certain “noses” have a particular signature, and we can ask for them by name if we have a specific type of scent in mind. But generally we brief two or three different houses, which compete for the task. Until we make a decision, they are paid nothing. But they are aware that, if their fragrance is selected, they’ve hit the jackpot.’

The fragrances that the houses put forward are tested by L’Oreal’s in-house ‘nose’, as well as by the designer. As Sanchez says, ‘After a while, we know what kind of scents a designer likes and dislikes; or which best reflect the brand. There is also an educational process as a designer’s olfactory skills evolve. At the end of the day, although we can make suggestions or nudge a designer away from a direction that may not be commercial, they have the final say.’

Once the fragrance has been selected, there is the all-important matter of designing the bottle. A perfume bottle represents a subtle form of brand communication as well as being a beautiful object in its own right, proudly displayed on a dressing table or bathroom shelf. Again, the designer has a strong influence here; but a specialist can also be called in. The bottle for Black Code was created by New York-based art director Fabien Baron, who has collaborated with Armani on a number of projects.

The manufacturing of perfume bottles is also a specialized industry. Three-quarters of the world's perfume bottles are produced by some 60 enterprises and 7,000 workers in the Vallée de la Bresle, not far from Dieppe in northern France. The largest, Saverglass, produces a million bottles a day. (It's worth observing at this point that the production of essential oils is no longer associated with France, despite romantic images of white jasmine flowers picked and crushed in Grasse and elsewhere in Provence. Fragrances are just as likely to be constructed from Turkish roses, Madagascan vanilla; or, more often than not, synthetic substances.)

The final stage is, of course, the marketing. Increasingly, in order to ensure that the perfume slots neatly into the label's overall brand strategy, the designer tends to turn again to his regular advertising collaborators. This makes sense, as the imagery utilized to promote the fragrance, whether in the media or at point of sale, may eventually lead customers to clothes, bags, sunglasses, and other products. Sanchez says that, as well as designing the bottle for Black Code, Fabien Baron also oversaw the advertising imagery for the fragrance. And, as we've already seen, when Chanel re-launched No. 5 with a campaign starring Nicole Kidman, the actress also appeared alongside designer Karl Lagerfeld on the catwalk. The art director Thomas Lenthal, who works for YSL Beauty, observes, 'The big difference is that when you are selling a dress, you're perhaps talking to thousands of people. But when you're working on a perfume, you're talking to millions of people. So the imagery is different – smoother, more conceptual.'

Sanchez points out that marketing a fragrance is challenging because it centres on an atmosphere rather than a visible product. She says, 'Often the psychology behind the images is quite complex, because it must tempt the customer to try the scent, as well as capturing the overall philosophy of the brand. A perfume may be a product – but it's not a detergent.'

Be that as it may, the commoditization of perfume is leading some discerning (and wealthy) customers away from mainstream brands. Just as in fashion there is a move towards limited editions, vintage finds and general exclusivity, so there is a growing market for made-to-measure fragrances. In Paris, both Guerlain and Jean Patou offer 'olfactory education' courses, followed by the chance for the individual to create a unique perfume from a range of aromas. Patou customers can even spend the day with the perfumer's resident 'nose', who will lead them to chocolate shops and markets to find out exactly which smells they prefer. He can then concoct an entirely idiosyncratic fragrance based on the results. But, as usual, individuality comes at a price – in this case, between €20,000 and €50,000.

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Retro brands retooled

‘With these brands you have to feel as passionate about the heritage as about the future.’

When you stand before the urbane façade of the Gucci store in Milan’s Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II – a 19th-century shopping arcade that is as far from a suburban mall as it is possible to imagine – words like ‘melodrama’ and ‘bloodshed’ don’t exactly leap to mind. But as part of the brand royal family, Gucci has grabbed more than its fair share of headlines.

Along with Burberry, Gucci is probably the finest example of image turnaround in the history of fashion. So revered is the story of its reinvention that ‘doing a Gucci’ has become a stock phrase, whispered like a mantra by all those trying to resurrect a designer relic. After Gucci’s success, everyone assumes they can take a half-forgotten label and bring it up to date in a cool, iconoclastic kind of way. Unfortunately, not everyone is Tom Ford.

The story began in 1922, when Guccio Gucci opened a company making upmarket baggage in Florence. Legend has it that the young Gucci had spent several months working at the Savoy hotel in London, where he noticed a nascent market of rich globetrotters, and correctly assumed they would be keen purchasers of luxury luggage and accessories. Italy’s leather-goods savoir-faire and its instinctive

adoption of family businesses favoured the growth of Gucci's empire, and Guccio soon had outposts in Rome and Milan.

In the 1950s, Guccio's son Aldo opened a boutique in New York – which was to be followed over time by branches in London, Tokyo, Hong Kong, and Paris. Rather like Hermès (see pages 156–57), Gucci profited from post-war consumer culture and the new marketing techniques that were being developed alongside it. The brand's iconic bamboo-handled bag, the 0063, appeared in 1957 and was quickly adopted by the likes of Jackie Kennedy and Liz Taylor. Gucci loafers found their way on to the feet of John Wayne. In 1964, the company produced a silk scarf in homage to Grace Kelly, which she wore in the presence of the paparazzi.

By the 1970s, the brand's distinctive interlocking double-G logo could be seen everywhere, from key-rings and T-shirts to bottles of whisky. But that was just the problem: the enterprise had split into a number of separate fiefdoms, each managed by a Gucci family member. With no logical strategy, licences were signed this way and that, and over the next decade the brand lost direction and prestige. Meanwhile, to the delight of the tabloid newspapers, the internal struggle to wrest control of the business had turned into a thriller, featuring financial mismanagement, denunciations in court and finally murder, when Maurizio Gucci – the last member of the family to run the company – was killed by a hitman in 1995. His widow, Patrizia Reggiani Martinelli, was convicted of organizing the murder and sentenced to 26 years in prison. History will remember that the scandal almost finished off the Gucci brand for good.

Shortly afterwards, the business was fully acquired by a Bahrain-based investment company called Investcorp, which had already held a 50 per cent stake. At that stage, Tom Ford had already been working as the company's in-house designer for five years, having been hired in 1990 by Dawn Mello, then Gucci's creative director. Born in Texas in 1962, Ford had graduated from Parsons School of Design with a degree in interior architecture. But the subject was not quite to his taste. In the book *Visionaries*, he tells Susannah Frankel, 'Architecture was just way too. . . it was just so serious. Oh my god, the pretentiousness of architecture! So I realized that I was getting more excited every month buying *Vogue* and I thought, you know, this is what I love, this is what I seem to be drawn to the whole time.'

Following his instincts, Ford worked with the New York fashion houses Perry Ellis and Cathy Hardwick before joining Gucci. It took some time for him to make his mark, but gradually his contemporary twist on 1970s designs began attracting critical attention. Ford's interpretation pushed the glitzy, logo-heavy side of Gucci into the background and favoured sophistication, sex and gloss. Crucially, he understood that a brand had to have a singular vision. As well as designing clothes for men and women, he took responsibility for handbags, shoes, accessories, and two new Gucci scents: Envy and Rush. Nothing that the company produced, from an advertising campaign to a store design, went ahead without Ford's approval. 'His great genius was to reconcile creativity with coherence,' says fashion consultant Jean-Jacques Picart.

In 1995, Ford hired French stylist Carine Roitfeld and photographer Mario Testino to overhaul Gucci's advertising. It became brazen, sexual, even shocking. Celebrities and opinion-formers noticed the change and adopted the brand – and with them, of course, came the wider public. Almost bankrupt when Ford came on board, Gucci is now the lynchpin of a group with annual sales of around €2.5 billion, of which Gucci itself brings in more than half.

CLIMBING OUT OF A TRENCH

One of the British companies that has 'done a Gucci' most successfully is Burberry. Although it has experienced image problems in the UK (see Chapter 2: Fashioning an identity), its achievements should not be underestimated.

The history of Burberry is fairly well known. Thomas Burberry opened his outfitters in Basingstoke, Hampshire, in 1856. It was a modest concern until his sons joined the business in the 1880s, when it opened a second store, in London, in partnership with a company called RB Rolls. During this period, Burberry perfected the woven waterproofed yarn known as 'gabardine', which proved perfect for rainwear. The fabric caught on, and Burberry was soon exporting to the rest of Europe, as well as North and Latin America. An outlet in Paris opened as early as 1909.

The company's most significant breakthrough came when it was asked to provide rainwear for officers during the First World War; the

item it came up with became known as the ‘trench coat’. If anything, this iconic garment became even more popular after the war, sported by explorers, plain-clothes policemen, and members of the public with secret dreams of heroism. Thomas Burberry & Sons was floated on the London Stock Exchange in 1920. Four years later, the famous black, white and red check made its first appearance as a raincoat lining.

When Thomas Burberry died, in 1926, his second son Arthur Michael Burberry continued to run the business, remaining at its helm until the early 1950s. By the time the company was acquired by Great Universal Stores (GUS) in 1955, its raincoats were considered classics, having been worn by Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman in *Casablanca*. (It’s hard to reconcile Bogart’s hard-bitten screen persona with an interest in fashion, but there you go.) Audrey Hepburn later wore one in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*. The brand rumbled along through the 1960s and 70s. In the 1980s, under chief executive Stanley Peacock, the company multiplied its licences. This had the old, all-too-familiar effect of increased sales in the mid-term, but a long-term degenerative impact on the brand.

The 1990s began badly for a weary and outmoded Burberry. Its umbrellas and raincoats did well with Japanese businessmen who admired British style, but elsewhere its trademark check was no longer considered a guarantee of quality. More than 30 licensees worldwide had plastered the Burberry name on everything from watches (in Switzerland) to whisky (in Korea). In order to boost profits the company was selling its goods in bulk to cut-price Japanese ‘grey-market’ retailers, who undercut the prices charged by classier outlets. When the economic crisis in Asia robbed Burberry of its most lucrative market, its finances plunged into turmoil.

Stanley Peacock retired as chief executive of Burberry in 1996. A year later, GUS recruited Rose Marie Bravo from Saks Fifth Avenue as Burberry’s new CEO, hoping she would be able to breathe life into the ailing brand. Briskly, controversially but effectively, Bravo took the matter in hand. She cut off the supply to the Japanese grey market, which had the immediate effect of causing Burberry’s sales to slump even further. GUS was advised by analysts to sell the brand – but its management bravely waited to see what Bravo could achieve. She reined in distribution, renegotiated licences, closed a number of small stores and gave the important ones a spiffing Britpop makeover. In the mean time she recruited a new design team, headed by Roberto Menichetti (he

was succeeded by Christopher Bailey in 2001). Menichetti launched the upmarket Prorsum range of womenswear (the name derives from the company's Latin motto, and means 'forwards'), which soon garnered positive reviews.

Through print advertising, Kate Moss and a host of other fresh British faces brought an unexpectedly rebellious, streetwise image to the brand. Consumers were intrigued – and what the advertising promised, the stores and the designs delivered. Burberry had not just been repositioned, but 're-imagined'. In March 2001, it announced that its sales had nearly doubled, to £425 million, while profits had tripled to £69.5 million (Adbrands.net, April 2004). Alongside men's and women's apparel, its range now includes accessories, fragrances, children's clothing and household objects. Burberry has shown, once again, that it was possible to bring a brand back from the brink.

THE ART OF PLUNDERING THE PAST

But that was just the beginning. Following in the slipstream of Burberry and Gucci, a whole host of brands have emerged from the cobwebs of history. Almost every week, it seems, we hear of another venerable label that has been given a facelift and a new suit of clothes, and then wheeled out to meet the shopping public. And the strategies are eerily similar.

In France, the luxury accessories maker ST Dupont has been re-launched with some familiar ingredients: overhauled 'concept' stores in Paris, Tokyo and Hong Kong, a flashy advertising campaign, and a new range of men's ready-to-wear. Previously, Dupont was known mainly for expensive pens and cigarette lighters – although the brand has elements in common with the likes of Vuitton and Hermès, having been launched by Simon Tissot Dupont in 1872 as a maker of luxury luggage. Later, in the 1930s, it developed a technique for applying Chinese lacquer to metal, producing a range of objects that fused Eastern ancient with Western modern. After the war, it concentrated on luxury cigarette lighters, and by the 1970s it was the reference in that market, taking a 70 per cent share. It branched out into pens, watches, eyewear and fragrances. Its first venture into clothing came in 1989, but by the beginning of the new millennium it was considered a dinosaur. Sales and profits faltered. Now, company president William Christie

says that Dupont wants to reposition itself as ‘a global lifestyle brand in luxury goods for men of today’ (st-dupont.com, November 2004).

Dupont is by no means alone. We’ve already heard about the resurrection of Asprey (see Chapter 5: The store is the star), and other great British brands have also emerged from the wings. Take Mulberry, for instance. The accessories and clothing brand is unusual in that, even though it was founded in 1971, it seemed superannuated almost from the start. It was only in 2002 that CEO Lisa Montague finally decided that the doddering granny drastically needed a Burberry-style makeover. She hired designer Nicholas Knightly (who had previously worked at Ghost), and he proceeded to knock Mulberry into shape by eliminating frumpiness and adding British eccentricity. The result was an odd but alluring blend of vintage and modern, as if Quentin Tarantino had decided to film an Agatha Christie novel. ‘I think of a big house in the country with chests of overflowing drawers,’ Knightly said. ‘You may not have the house in the country, but you can have the dress to swan about in it.’ (‘A Very British Coup’, *The Guardian*, 23 October 2004.) Perhaps not surprisingly, Knightly has since been lured away to design leather goods at Louis Vuitton.

An equally successful transition was managed by Scottish knitwear company Pringle, for ever associated with diamond-patterned sweaters and golfers. The brand’s adoption by soccer ‘casuals’ (read: ‘thugs’) had edged its status further down the road to decline. Almost bankrupt under its previous owner, Dawson International, Pringle was bought by Hong Kong millionaire Kenneth Fang for just £5 million in 2000. By 2003, sales were running at more than £100 million. ‘Pringle is the new Burberry’, raved *The Guardian* (24 September 2003), as the brand took the previously unimaginable step of rolling out a collection during London Fashion Week.

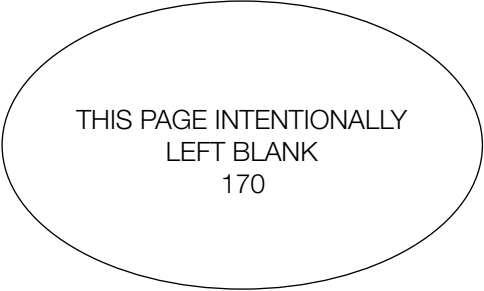
The turnaround was attributed to the skill of chief executive Kim Winser, previously the only female director of Marks & Spencer. Winser observed that in the 1950s and 60s Pringle had been ‘an amazing, glamorous brand’, and noted that advertising images from the period featured curvaceous ‘sweater girls’ in Pringle jumpers. In a stroke of genius, the sexy British model Sophie Dahl was recruited as a modern-day sweater girl for an advertising campaign. A revamped store in London’s Sloane Street was opened by the actor Ewan MacGregor, cleverly summing up the brand’s new formula of Scottish roots meets contemporary glamour. By chance, at about the same time celebrities like Catherine Zeta Jones, Robbie Williams and Geri Halliwell had

begun taking up golf as a hobby; Pringle's most embarrassing association suddenly became an attribute.

Winser also had an incredible advantage in the shape of designer Stuart Stockdale, who had worked with the likes of Jasper Conran, upmarket US retailer J. Crew and Romeo Gigli. Stockdale's collections enhanced positive elements like the diamond motif and the brand's association with luxury cashmere, while running roughshod over its dullsville recent past. He showed items such as cashmere twinsets in searing fuchsia pink, strapless lemon yellow vests worn with bikini bottoms, pastel-coloured coats, sweaters made of chiffon, and cashmere knickers with buttons up the front. 'What's so exciting about it, from a technical point of view, is how innovative the company has been since it was set up in 1815,' he told *The Scotsman*. 'It started initially as an underwear company then progressed from under to outer garments and that's really how the twinset was invented in the 1930s, so it's a very interesting evolution.' ('Check mates', 9 June 2003.)

Pringle's return to grace was so remarkable that in 2003 Winser was voted Europe's third most successful businesswoman by *The Wall Street Journal*. Helpfully, she later shared some rebranding tips with the *Financial Times*. 'I think probably the most important thing is to understand the brand's personality,' she explained. 'With these brands you have to feel as passionate about the heritage as about the future. Secondly, you have to decide what is at the heart of the brand: Burberry has the raincoat, we at Pringle have our cashmere and knitwear. . . I also think it's absolutely fundamental at the early stages of taking on a brand to involve all your team – your immediate senior team, your management. . . suppliers. . . If they totally understand the vision they'll help you to achieve it. Obviously, you also have to focus on what people are spending their money on, and you have to work on your PR: if you're going to be making changes, people have to understand your changes.' ('Textbook Changes', 7 May 2004.) Winser has since gone on to work her magic for venerable British rainwear brand Aquascutum.

Of course, not all brand revamps can be as successful as those described above. Certainly, the image of Church & Co, the classic English shoe brand that Prada snapped up in 1999 – only to sell again in 2003 to a Luxembourg-based investment fund called Equinox – doesn't seem to have budged. Perhaps its owners are waiting for the right moment. Or maybe, once in a while, a retro brand with an unimpaired reputation for quality is best left alone.



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Targeted male

‘Men don’t buy fashion – they buy clothes.’

Sean Connery, Michael Caine and Steve McQueen. Cary Grant and Humphrey Bogart. Maybe a hint of James Dean and early Brando. Sinatra when he was recording for Capitol. Al Pacino in *Scarface*. The guys from *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction*. These are the sort of men we would like to emulate, if we had the looks or the charisma. We can, at least, aspire to the clothes – which is why adult men’s fashion tends towards the conservative. Most of us don’t care what the male models on the catwalks are wearing; we’d much rather resemble our icons. And so, in offices and on the streets, men’s fashion barely changes from season to season. A button more or less, double- or single-breasted, the colour of a shirt, the width of a tie or a trouser-leg – but that’s about it. We wear suits and coats and jeans and T-shirts.

In the United Kingdom, market researcher Mintel notes that, with a total market value of £7.22 billion in 2003, the menswear sector is equivalent to only 49 per cent of womenswear sales (£14.87 billion). This proportion has remained unchanged for the last decade. In terms of distribution, women have a choice of up to four times as many stores as men. Mintel’s report adds, ‘It is also worth remembering that the increased popularity among men of casual clothing over formal, both for leisure and in some cases for work, may also have contributed in small part to slower value growth than would otherwise have been

the case, given... the reduced volume sales of items such as suits and ties.'

Things are evolving, however – slowly and infinitesimally. At least men are paying attention to their appearance these days. They're more interested in cut and colour; they go to the gym; they buy hair gel and moisturiser. They have even been known to go shopping unaccompanied. It may sound ludicrous, but this is all quite new.

'VERY GQ'

In the opinion of Dylan Jones, the editor of British *GQ*, '[Men] are certainly less sophisticated consumers of fashion than women. When you look at the menswear industry in Britain, it's only about 20 years old. And when you look at the men's magazine industry, it's about 17 years old. This generation of men is the first that has been acclimatized to spending money on fashion. It started with the rise of style magazines in the 80s, when men started seeing images of themselves projected back at them for the first time. Suddenly you were looking at pictures that resembled you, rather than a model. And this, combined with the rise of menswear in Britain – which was basically kick-started by Paul Smith – made it a very exciting period for men's fashion.'

Jones speaks from experience, having edited the influential men's magazine *Arena* in the 1980s. *Arena*, a deeply stylish publication showcasing the organic graphic design of Neville Brody, was the first men's style magazine I ever saw. It was also the first time that I became aware of brands like Armani, Cerruti and, yes, Paul Smith. (But my favourite cover was still the one of Michael Caine, shot by David Bailey back in the 1960s.)

The men's magazine market has evolved considerably since then, and there are now titles serving almost every sector, from the blue-collar publications once known as 'lad mags' to the niche and sophisticated *GQ*. Jones notes with humorous pride that *GQ* has been pegged as one of the few magazines serving the 'metrosexual' market – a faintly derogatory term covering men who have more in their bathroom cabinets than a Bic razor, Gillette shaving cream, cheap aftershave and deodorant.

'Men who buy *GQ* are buying into a certain world, just as the women who buy *Vogue* are buying into that world,' Jones observes. 'Fashion is

part of it, but we're also covering cars, sex, food, travel. . . In any case, it's fair to say that men don't buy fashion, they buy clothes. If you go to the collections twice a year to see what the men's fashion designers are up to, it's really just a question of tweaking. One year sportswear might be more prominent, the next tailoring. It's very difficult to reinvent the wheel every six months with menswear. *GQ* readers are probably more interested in fashion than the readers of any other men's magazine, but men in general are not as obsessive about the changing nature of fashion as women can be.'

Paradoxically, this opens a window of opportunity for fashion brands, which – if they prove their worth – can land very loyal male consumers. Jones observes, 'Men are concerned about status and they like to be confident. So if they feel good in a certain item, if their wife or girlfriend approves, and it gets a nod of appreciation from their colleagues, they're likely to go back for more.'

This explains the continuing success of Armani and Paul Smith. One might also add Hedi Slimane, formerly at Dior Homme, to the small pantheon of designers that have been enthusiastically embraced by men. With his sleek, skinny black suits that armour the body like a carapace, the rigorous Slimane was yang to that other Dior superstar John Galliano's yin. The svelte young designer joined Dior Homme from Yves Saint Laurent in 2001, and could realistically claim to have made men smarter, hipper and more dashing. His friend and adviser Jean-Jacques Picart says, 'There is an almost military discipline about Hedi's suits. They are designed in such a way that it's impossible to slump when you're wearing them. You have to hold yourself straight, or they don't look right.' Another fan, Karl Lagerfeld, is said to have embarked on his famous diet, not only for the overall health benefit, but also so that he could wear Slimane's whip-thin ensembles.

Picart adds, 'Hedi brought a sort of sensuality to the metallic and the graphic. There's nothing curved or soft about his designs. It's a dramatic contrast to the absolute glamour that Galliano is providing for women. A Dior woman could never live with a Dior man. Bernard Arnault [who hired both designers] created equilibrium via opposites. He delivered the extreme for both sexes.'

Slimane left Dior in early 2007 – apparently after a disagreement about his contract – but it's doubtful that the world of menswear has heard the last of him. He was replaced by another interesting designer, Kris Van Assche, who worked in Slimane's design team at Dior before

launching his own brand. Van Assche offered new possibilities, with his blend of gangster chic and hip-hop references, as well as his liking for *trompe l'oeil* details: a tie that turned out to be part of a collar, two waistcoats that were actually one. Hard to top Slimane, though, who through his work at Dior created an entirely new male silhouette.

Another cult name in menswear is Ozwald Boateng. With his Savile Row heritage and trademark bright silk linings, Boateng makes every man look like John Steed, the indomitable hero of *The Avengers*. Both Boateng and Slimane have outfitted their fair share of icons: the suits of the former have been sported by the likes of Sir Mick Jagger, Robbie Williams, George Michael and Keanu Reeves, while Slimane dressed Alex Kapranos from the rock band Franz Ferdinand, Sonic Youth's Thurston Moore, and the singer Beck. In a market where consumers take their cues from their idols, the celebrity connection is perhaps even more important than it is in the women's fashion arena.

This explained the presence of Adrian Brody, the Oscar-winning actor, in a successful print and poster campaign for Ermenegildo Zegna. Although Brody was by no means an obvious choice, he incarnated a certain intellectual grace that fans of Zegna appreciated. In any case, the brand was already an established favourite among well-heeled, well-dressed males.

Michelangelo Zegna put down the roots of the business in Trivero, Italy, at the end of the 19th century. For the first few years it was a small-scale fabric producer, but then Michelangelo's son Ermenegildo began importing luxurious wools – fine merinos, vicuñas and cashmeres – from Asia, South America and Australia, in order to compete with the dominant English and Scottish textile markets. The firm established a reputation for providing the softest and most sumptuous fabrics, and by 1938 Ermenegildo Zegna was exporting to more than 40 different markets. Even today, the family continues to supply fabric to brands that it should, by rights, consider rivals.

Ermenegildo's sons, Aldo and Angelo, led the expansion into ready-to-wear in the 1960s, having understood that tailors were a vanishing breed. Today the label has nearly 400 stores around the world and turns over €600 million a year. As well as ready-to-wear and tailored suits, it sells accessories, a sportswear line and a fragrance. But the quality of its fabrics remains the key to its brand identity. To underline this fact, each year the company weaves its finest wools into an almost mystical

yarn, with which it makes no more than 50 suits. These can be bought for €8,000 each – and there is always a waiting list. Each purchaser's name is hand-sewn into the lining. A further cry from tracksuit bottoms and football shirts is difficult to imagine.

FINE AND DANDY

But while it's easy to portray guys as a bunch of slobs whose idea of dressing for dinner is to change their socks, there have, of course, always been trends in men's fashion – and even some people who subscribe to them. The basic form of today's suit can be traced back to the 19th century, when the English gentry were proud landowners, spending a great deal of time outdoors. Anglo-Saxon style, therefore, was practical and pared down, and basically descended from riding gear. Simplicity was the order of the day – ostentation was considered bad form, if not downright suspect. The men's clothing of the late 19th and early 20th century was the sartorial equivalent of a stiff upper lip. Austere though this style may have been, it set the standard for the Western male, and ensured that Britain led the field in the textile sector.

Le style anglais was undermined in the 1920s by the Americans, who began experimenting with a new style of relaxed fashion. Voluminous trousers, short-sleeved tennis shirts, soft-collared shirts worn without ties, relaxed suits that could be worn all day. . . these developments were shockingly new. In addition, the electric razor, invented in 1928, meant that more men were shearing off their moustaches and beards. The template for the 20th-century male had been set.

American influences dominated the 1940s and 50s, as well. The young *zazous* of Paris, with their over-long jackets and greased-back hair, looked like cartoon versions of Chicago gangsters. Fashion historian François Baudot observes that the scene was closely linked to jazz, swing and the jitterbug – possibly the first example of a youth trend that combined music and dress. It was taken to extremes in the various forms of dress codes associated with rock and roll, from the timeless white T-shirt, leather jacket and jeans to the Teddy Boys, those sartorial throwbacks who took their cues from Edwardian costume. For those who didn't fit into the strange new category of 'teenager' – a creation of post-war consumerism and marketing – inspiration was

to be found in Italy, with its sharp suits and Vespas. The film *Roman Holiday* (1953), starring Gregory Peck and Audrey Hepburn, still looks like a fashion plate.

It is difficult to summarize the 1960s, a period in which men's fashion seemed to go into overdrive. This was the time when ready-to-wear took the high ground, and the concept of personal tailors appeared to have been relegated to the past. While some men clung doggedly to a more classic look, it was generally a time of rejection and invention – wear anything, as long as it's something your father wouldn't have been seen dead in. The experimentation continued into the following decade, an era of androgyny and excess that made the generation gap seem far wider than a mere 20 years. The growing influence of Milanese designers was apparent in the dance-floor sheen of disco, but the Brits, doing rather better out of the deal, had saved themselves by embracing punk rock.

The term 'punk' (which derived from prison slang meaning 'delinquent' or 'worthless trash', with catamite undertones) had been current since the early 1970s in the United States, where it was associated with the low-tech garage rock thrashed out by the likes of Iggy & the Stooges, the New York Dolls and, later on, The Ramones. In the United Kingdom, though, punk rock was a pure creation of marketing. It owed its genesis to Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood, who ran the Sex store in London's King's Road. McLaren was a former art student who had been inspired by 1960s radical politics, notably the Situationist movement in Paris. Westwood, meanwhile, had moved on from making clothes for die-hard Teddy Boys to something altogether more original, running up quasi-fetishist garments daubed with arcane political slogans.

Both McLaren and Westwood were well versed in subculture and understood the mechanics of the media. In order to give Sex a live, physical presence, McLaren brought together the Sex Pistols as a promotional vehicle for the store. Key to the band's runaway success was the energetic presence and aggressive sartorial style of John Lydon, with his green hair and ripped, safety-pin-adorned T-shirts. At the time, Britain wallowed in deep recession, and punk provided the perfect outlet for its unemployed, disaffected youth, who literally spat frustration. With McLaren's management, Westwood's designs and the Pistols' own anarchic enthusiasm driving it, punk rock took off. As McLaren had calculated, an outraged mainstream media was delighted

to cover the phenomenon. By the time the Pistols split, in 1979, they had spawned dozens of imitators and spearheaded a movement that traversed Europe and the United States.

By the mid-80s, however, it seemed as though punk had never happened. An economic boom meant that Wall Street brokers became the new fashion avatars, with their double-breasted suits, shoulder pads and wide ties. Movies and even literature provided archetypes: Gordon Gekko, as portrayed by Michael Douglas in the movie *Wall Street* (1987); and Sherman McCoy, the callow yuppie anti-hero of Tom Wolfe's bestseller, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1988). Like a slightly later book, *American Psycho* (1991) – also a critique of yuppie culture – *Bonfire* obsessively cited the brand names of its characters' clothes. The conceit was designed to highlight the materialism of the age – but it also provided a handy shopping list.

The following decade saw the inevitable backlash. Sportswear, which had been gaining ground at the tail end of the 80s, thanks in part to the hip-hop community, elided almost completely with mainstream fashion – the two sectors are now virtually indistinguishable. A mass rejection of yuppie values led to an inevitable relaxation of workplace dress codes. For a while, it looked as if the suit might disappear for good. But classics are never entirely suffocated by trends; the suit not only made a return, but did so in its most elitist and luxurious form.

A TAILOR-MADE OPPORTUNITY

When Carlo Brandelli took over the venerable Savile Row tailor Kilgour, French & Stanbury, he already had one of the greatest fashion icons in cinematic history on his side. The tailor made the suit that Cary Grant wears throughout the Hitchcock film *North by Northwest* (1959). Whether he is being pursued by a malicious crop duster or seduced by Eva Marie Saint, Grant remains impeccably smooth; and so do his threads. Brandelli also discovered that Kilgour had made suits for Rex Harrison. Unfortunately, a fire in 1982 destroyed the patterns, almost taking the building with them. Despite this disadvantage, Kilgour is once again a reference for the sartorially discerning.

Brandelli – his heritage, as one might guess, is Italian – always had an eye for the bespoke. Growing up in Parma and Milan, before moving to London, he recounts that he was surrounded by tailors and

craftsmen, and learned many of his skills directly from a generation whose lifestyle seemed to be in peril. It was almost inevitable that he would become a designer.

In 1992, at the age of 24, Brandelli launched a menswear brand called Squire, based in a former art gallery in Clifford Street, Mayfair. Working with the art director Peter Saville and the photographer Nick Knight – both legends in their own field – Brandelli invented what he terms ‘a new visual identity and language for a contemporary menswear brand’. The idea was to create a world where art and fashion collided. It worked so well, he recalls, that the brand was soon dressing celebrities in both the entertainment and design fields.

Eventually, though, the tide turned – Squire spawned too many imitators, and Brandelli grew disenchanted with the mainstream fashion business. He became a freelance designer for brands in Japan and Italy before arriving at 8 Savile Row, the home of Kilgour, French & Stanbury, in 1998: ‘The move was born out of a craving to go back to my roots, to rediscover tailoring. It was only when I got here that I realized it had this chic, cinematic reputation. As well as dressing stars like Cary Grant and Rex Harrison, it had worked with Tommy Nutter [the maverick tailor of the 60s and 70s], so it had always been a forward-thinking firm.’

Secretly, though, Brandelli yearned to run his own business – and to make his mark, once again, on men’s fashion. He didn’t know whether it would be possible to take over Kilgour, but, as he says, ‘I asked the question, and the answer turned out to be “yes”.’ He acquired the business with a group of backers in October 2003, with the ambition of creating a ‘luxurious, elegant, English menswear brand’. He adds, ‘I didn’t want to return to the past – I wanted to bring the past back to life in a contemporary way.’

In reality, bespoke had been moving back into favour for some time, thanks to a new generation of tailors led by Timothy Everest, Oswald Boateng, Mark Powell, John Pearse and Richard James. They had already attracted the attention of fashion editors and stars; Everest, for example, outfitted Tom Cruise for the film *Mission: Impossible* (1996). In short, through skill and luck, Brandelli found himself in the right place at the right time.

The brand name was shortened to Kilgour, and Peter Saville’s design studio re-drew the logo. But this was by no means the least of the changes. The elegant 1920s Portland stone façade of the premises

was renovated, while the interior was overhauled to Brandelli's specifications by interior architects Cenacchi, who had also worked on stores for Yves Saint Laurent and Chanel. 'One of my inspirations was the French architect Jean-Michel Frank. I wanted a combination of minimalism and art deco,' explains Brandelli. 'I felt that the brand identity should take its cue from the look of the store.'

So what is the brand identity? Brandelli feels that it is a contemporary look at what he calls 'correct' British style: 'I was under the impression that the traditional English look had been usurped by the French and the Italians, so to a certain extent I wanted to bring it back home.'

Just as a Scot and an Irishman provided the best incarnations of that very English agent, James Bond, perhaps it takes an Italian to show the Brits how to dress. Brandelli says his trademark suit is single-breasted and charcoal grey. 'It's a look you can wear any time. I also like the idea of a garment whose history you can trace in its design.' He adds that the 'correct' colour palette for the English male is charcoal grey, navy, white and sky-blue. Anything else smacks of the trendy. 'Men have a conservative approach to clothes. They often live difficult and complex lives, with a lot of stress, so in clothing they look for simplicity. I also think that many of them have become resistant to being spoon-fed with marketing imagery. They like to make their own choices, which is where bespoke comes in. They can be part of the process.'

Nevertheless, Kilgour was obliged to devise some marketing imagery of its own. Brandelli turned once again to Peter Saville and Nick Knight. The resulting image was a suited figure reflected in a circular mirror on a plain floor. The suit-wearer's face was not visible, but we could tell from his nonchalant pose and the way he lightly held a pair of spectacles that he was distinguished. 'Nick's idea was to play on the theme of narcissism, hence the mirror,' says Brandelli. 'We didn't want to be overt or obvious. We also wanted to avoid showing the man's face: we felt that our target customers would put themselves in the picture. Overall, we wanted an image that suited our clientele. They are well travelled and creative. They are thinkers.'

Customers can have suits hand-made on the premises, if they are willing to pay more than £2,400. Other suits are cut by Kilgour and then assembled off-site. This keeps the cost down to around £1,500. The method gives aspiring males access to cutting-edge Savile Row tailoring and a contemporary British fashion brand in one affordable package. 'Even my prices,' says Brandelli, 'are correct.'

As a result, Kilgour is now considered one of the most influential British fashion brands. But quite apart from being a re-branding case study, the transformation of 8 Savile Row suggests that men's clothing is reflecting an overall trend: the search for the unique. Retaining the services of a tailor has become a statement of independence.

GROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

Even so, men who cherish the idea of a suit made by Kilgour or Ozwald Boateng remain rare indeed, as do those who have developed an iron resistance to marketing. When questioned by the Textile Federation in France, 46.5 per cent of male respondents listed their favourite brand as Levi's, followed by Zara, H&M and Adidas. It's certainly no coincidence that these brands are highly visible and (with the exception of Zara) have large communication budgets.

On a more upmarket level, the German brand Hugo Boss is a male fashion reference to rival Paul Smith and Armani. The original Hugo Boss founded his work-wear garment business in 1923. He died in 1948 and the company has long been out of family hands. Since 1991 the brand has been owned by the Italian group Marzotto (which also snapped up Valentino in 2002).

Boss relies heavily on marketing. Advertising images are created every season at its headquarters in Metzingen and positioned by external agencies, which place an emphasis on international business publications. Like Armani, the brand has a long-standing relationship with the film industry. In addition, since the 1970s it has sponsored a wide range of sporting events, including Formula 1, sailing, boxing, golf and tennis. These are all chosen to 'reflect the values of the core Boss brand: internationalism, perfection, and success' (www.boss.com). Boss has maintained its high profile in the menswear market (it launched womenswear only in 1998) by courting the business community and sticking to time-honoured male values in its communications. Hence it is seen as a 'safe bet', free of ambiguity. Even the revelation in 1997 (by the Austrian magazine *Profil* and *The Washington Post*) that Hugo Boss provided German army uniforms during the Second World War failed to dent the brand's popularity.

Creating brand imagery that appeals to men is a delicate business, according to the fashion photographer Vincent Peters: 'In men's fashion

the boundaries are stricter. There's a lot of sensitivity around issues of sexuality. Many American brands, in particular, are fearful of projecting an image that might be considered too gay. The other problem for the photographer is that masculinity is a more psychological concept than femininity. I would argue that it's easier to capture femininity visually.' This explains the frequent use of established male role models as brand reference points.

One important area of male fashion is the wrist-watch, a man's most prominent accessory. Watch brands have also had recourse to male icons, including the late Steve McQueen for the Tag Heuer Monaco. According to Dylan Jones, 'Watches play a similar role for men that shoes and handbags do for women; although a watch is often a much larger investment. It's obviously a status symbol. You may not have the suit you want, the car you want, the woman you want... but you can have a great watch. It says something about your taste, as well as expressing your personality and your aspirations. When you think about it, men have far fewer ways of communicating those things: we can't really do it through our hair or our shoes or our bag, so the watch becomes a communication tool.'

If men's fashion is still a growing industry, then skin products for men – often referred to as 'grooming products' – have barely registered on the radar. 'The sector is in its infancy,' confirms Dylan Jones. 'We're buying skin products, but nowhere near as many of them as we will in the future.'

Researcher Datamonitor predicted that men's usage of personal care products in Europe and the USA would grow from US\$31.6 billion in 2003 to US\$37.6 billion in 2008. Its report, *Evolution of Global Consumer Trends* (2005), suggested that 'role anxiety' among men was becoming more apparent, with pressure on them to look younger and fitter at work. Among European and US men, the report found that 73 per cent of men felt that spending time on personal appearance was 'important or very important' to them.

But the market is still very much focused on personal hygiene, which covers almost 70 per cent of sales. More sophisticated products such as anti-wrinkle creams, while growing in popularity, have yet to make a significant impact. This puts Jean-Paul Gaultier's *Tout Beau Tout Propre* line of cosmetics for men at the farthest side of the cutting edge.

In Dylan Jones's view, 'Make-up for men is never going to be enormous, but it's certainly going to be bigger than it is now.'

Moisturized, wrinkle-free, blemishes disguised and wearing a bespoke suit – say hello to the 21st-century man.