

# THE name game



In the glory days of couture, designers' names rolled off the tongue like candy, stealing a glance of *Women's Wear Daily* was a way to feel like an industry insider, and fashion editors set the tone for what women would be putting on, facing up, and wearing out.

Not anymore. Some of today's reporters don't cover the fashion on the runway; instead they reveal what Lindsay Lohan wore to the *Tootsie* spring show. The measure of how hot a designer is depends on how many starlets are out and about in their threads. So aside from television shows and magazines geared toward celebrity, if you want to see the clothing, you'll need to look at *The New York Times* Fashion supplement or industry-related publications.

What caused this shift in focus, from the clothing to the body it adorns? In the earliest part of the century, movie stars wore what other women wore, more glamorous perhaps, but usually their own clothing. It wasn't until around 1920 that the movie studios started hiring costume designers and celebrities began to sit off fashion trends. Then, however, stars were glamorous and exciting, but not necessarily rich. They watched the runway from afar and when designers asked them to model a couture gown, they were happy to tell reporters its illustrious name.

Nowadays, famous personalities are less likely to want to share the camera... or the cash. Why should they promote someone else's brand when they can place their brand on you? Every woman in a L.A.M.B. sweater is advertising Gwen Stefani's next album, while putting money in her pocket. Every man who puts on a pair of Sean John pants is hoping to gain some of P. Diddy's bad boy image, while financing the wealth that allows the mogul to maintain it.

Even supermodels have gotten into the design business. These women, who strode the runway to fame by looking beautiful in other people's clothing, now stalk the catwalk in creations carrying their own names. Although they started out as beautiful hangings, adored for how they made other people's designs look, they've become superstars in important that everyone wants to dress like they do... not in the designer clothes they wear on magazine covers, but behind the scenes, and behind their seams. Actresses are replacing models on the covers of magazines, so why wouldn't these gazelles fix their eyes on another avenue for their fame? Fashion's elite models are in a sense killing two birds with one stonefish.

But how has this really affected the fashion industry? In the early 1990s women increased their clothing spending by more than 50 percent, with women under 30 increasing their spending by even greater amounts. In more recent years, although spending has slightly declined, women's apparel is still an 80 billion-dollar plus a year industry. Between October 2004 and October 2005, American women spent more than 17 billion dollars on fashion footwear alone, a more than ten percent increase over 2003. All things considered, today's women are spending at least as much money on clothing now as any women in the past, the only difference is who the money is going to.

Really, though, why should the average consumer care if her money is going to clothing designed in the name of Ralph Lauren or in the name of Jennifer Lopez? Does it make fashion less fashionable if every teenager dreams of looking like Hilary Duff instead of saving up for her first Chanel out? What's the great concern?

The concern is that while Hilary is adorable and J. Lo has a fabulous ass, that a roomful of Duffs and Lopeses is a pretty boring place. Most adult women, at the sight of a pack of twelve-year-old girls dressed like Britney Spears, think "four mother let you go out in that?!" rather than "Oh, how cute. They do love a pop icon." And yet, there they are with their identical Kate Spade bags drooping over the newest pair of Manolo Blahniks. In other words... caring about designers.

Fashion may have been overrun by celebrities, but the designers' core audience is still there. Most women on the Upper East Side wouldn't be caught dead wearing a Rayoné sequined sweater today, any more than they would have shopped at their local department store ten years ago. The "fashionable" women still shop at designer boutiques, and know how to find what they want, they shrug off the media's obsession with movie stars as short-sighted and gauche.

WHEN DID FASHION STOP BEING ABOUT THE PEOPLE WHO MAKE THE CLOTHES AND START BEING ABOUT THE PEOPLE WHO WEAR THEM?

Then, of course, there are the rest of us — women who own one fabulous pair of expensive shoes and fifteen pairs from the bargain bin. Women who buy the knockoff bag on the street because Kate Beckinsale looked so hot with the real one at the Luca Luca show at Fashion Week, but who whip out their credit cards for a ready-to-wear line at Barney's. Your best friend, who saves up for a designer evening gown, but loves Nicky Hilton and can't wait to buy one of her purses. She's the average woman on a shopping spree who loves fame and fashion, your daughter, your mother, you.

Would it be nice to have more fashion coverage of the clothing on the runway? Of course it would be, but half the audience is watching to see who's sitting by the catwalk. Let us, as women and consumers, request a compromise. Lure us in, you fashion photographers, with promises of fame and scandal, and amaze us with beautiful clothing and glamour. Please, clothing designers, show us the extravagance of haute couture, and make us pull out our wallets for how the movie stars are wearing your newest line. Make celebrities our entrée to fashion, instead our escape from it. Oh, and if Matthew McConaughey is going to be sitting in the front row of your next fashion show... save a seat next to him for me. I promise to look fabulous in one of your designs.

by elizabeth boskey