

Style

Special is as special does



Vanessa Friedman
Fashion

As President Obama flew to London for the G20 summit, Sir Philip Green was on his route to New York to open the first US branch of Topshop. These two pieces of public opinion could almost have passed each other in the air, as each went to spread their respective economic gospel in the other's country. Regardless of whether their attempts to buoy the markets will work in the long term, it certainly won't be for want of trying.

Consider Sir Philip's project. There could not be a worse time to open a megastore - reputedly worth \$200m - in Manhattan. The optimism apparent in the Englishman's investment in New York real estate is astonishing. And yet he is celebrated with not one but three parties, attended by almost as many celebs as serenaded the president's inauguration on the Mall.

Perhaps Sir Philip's confidence springs from the natural fascination between Americans and Brits dating from our complicated colonial past. After all, a guy always wants the girl who got away, just as that girl will always have a lingering nostalgia for her first love, even if he demurs her wrong with all that taxation and stuff.

The phenomenon has more prosaic explanations too. English designers have long harboured fantasies of retaking America - it's such a big market that if

you can sell there you don't really need to sell anywhere else. (Hence the fact that so many US talents stay in the US - why waste economic and emotional energy to compete in the lands of Gault and Chantel?) Indeed, it became a bit of a trend among young Brits such as Matthew Williamson, Laetia Bartley, Alex Tenenperley, Jonathan Saunders and Roland Mouret to decamp to Atlantic shores after a few seasons in London.

The nominal reason was to increase their orders from US department stores, which like to see collections early, the better to place their orders early, the better to get deliveries early, the better to get people into stores. Designers asserted that the gains in income compensated for the loss in publicity caused by their becoming tiny fish in big ponds ruled by the giant tuns of Ralph Lauren and Marc Jacobs.

Yet Laetia has returned to London; Tenenperley has gone viral, and Mouret has chosen Paris for his RM line. The only special fashion relationship still thriving could well be the partnership between Rick Owens and Gareth Pugh (Owens being the California punk whose washed leather has made him a cult figure, and Pugh the skinny Brit Goth he backed). And that is based in Paris, too, neutral ground, I guess. Topshop is partly surprised to be using its New York home to give smaller British

labels a springboard into America: Proen, Richard Nicoll and Saunders's capsule lines will feature alongside the highly successful designs of Kate Moss, who cut the ribbon (match) at the store in floor-length gown, bias-cut chiffon. Apparently the idea is to use one special relationship to create more.

Certainly in Moss's case this seems to have worked, as the opening would be seen as a dress rehearsal for her stint as co-host of the Metropolitan Museum's Costume Institute gala next month, and her clothes seem as popular among Manhattanites as Londoners: a few days after Topshop opened, there were lines of people patiently waiting to get some of her indefinable British cool into their closet. (Don't they know that the clothes look good on her because she's Kate Moss, not because of the silhouettes?) The woman can make a garbage bag look desirable - and has. (Then again, her English compatriots seem equally deluded.)

Still, for a few weeks, the Brits will have done what no amount of rate-cutting had managed: they have got American or New Yorkers at least shopping again. The question becomes: will it last? The thing about the US-UK axis is that it is so fraught with expectations and stereotypes as to make every choice, from clothing to

cosmetics, a loaded issue - which brings us to a certain special figure of the special relationship: Michelle Obama.

Before she embarked on her sartorial seduction of Europe, bloggers to www.nuts-o-mag, a site dedicated to the first lady, voiced concern that the "rubbish" British tabloids might "take her apart". The Daily Mail had overcome its adoration by day three, whereupon it labelled her Junya Watanabe cardigan "bizarre" and carpet "It seems [she] decided to travel light, as she wore the... gear rack she went yesterday, for a third time." But criticism came from America too. "Lili," a blogger the Mochasin big-bow blouse Michelle wore in Prague, posted: "I don't like the blouse and I do not feel I need to apologise by saying her hair and makeup look great to compensate. We just want to admit that sometimes she will make fashion mistakes and get over it."

Facilities had started to breed contempt on both sides of the pond - the same risk Topshop runs in moving to New York. In London, it was a retail tourist destination akin to Harrods; by making itself a part of the US retail landscape, matter how many lights and looks it offers, it may become less special after all.

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Upswing in the downturn

Women are buying fewer clothes but for men at the moment it's spend spend spend. Charlie Porter investigates

London mayor Boris Johnson and French president Nicolas Sarkozy should be rejecting: apparently, their enchantments in sleep, shop, sleep have not fallen on deaf ears after all. Women's apparel sales fell 6 per cent to \$18bn in the US during the first nine months of 2008 but, according to the High Net Worth report from market research agency Lendav Research, men's wear sales rose 1 per cent to \$6bn. Apparently, when the going gets tough, the tough male... buys clothes.

This is spending that runs counter to what might be expected in a time of rising unemployment and curtailed bonuses. Men's wear designers, tailors and retailers, in a mood of cautious optimism, tell of unexpectedly positive results.

"We're pleased and happy," says Tom Ford, who launched his men's wear-only line (strong-shouldered, high-pressed suits) sold in stores that feel like private houses in April 2007, towards the tail end of the economic boom. "We're building up well because our clothes are perceived as investments."

"Men are loyal and tend to shop in a planned-out way," continues Ford. "Women move from brand to brand depending on who has done a particular trend. Men go into a store and they will spend more money because they'll buy for the whole season. They don't look at shopping as a recession the way women do." A downturn, after all, makes the retail game much less fun. It should also be remembered that men still earn substantially more than women: UK government figures released in November 2008 put male full-time earnings at 17.3 per cent higher than women's. So female shoppers feel the pinch first.

"We've had 20 new clients in the past four weeks," says Andra Rowland, owner of bespoke tailors Anderson & Sheppard. "That may not sound much, but for us it's very strong, and a pleasant surprise. A good percentage are first-time bespoke buyers, and most are between 35 and 50. Hopefully they'll be with us for a long while." Rowland says that at least 60 per cent of the new clients are UK-based, so the increase isn't just due to foreigners taking advantage of the weakened pound.



Other tailors tell similar stories. Hazzman, the oldest tailor on the Row, is 12 per cent up on sales so far in 2008. They point to dissatisfaction with the mass luxury market and a desire for quality as reasons for the uptick. In February, Norton & Sons had its best month since current owner Patrick Grant took over the then-dormant house in 2005. "There are times for exuberance in fashion and times for quiet elegance," he says, "and I think right now the latter seems more appropriate. Service Row exalts at simple, understated style and enduring value, both of which I think are enormously relevant today."



There are other signs of green shoots in the men's wear luxury business. Ralph Lauren is about to launch its first range of watches, all using mechanical movements (unlike most other fashion brands); the cheapest, a steel chronograph, will cost £3,400. Berluti's sales of high-end shoes for 2008 are so far said to be above those of 2007. And, at US department store Neiman Marcus, one of the biggest luxury stores of last year was a men's-only grooming line called Alfred & Hoff, which has been so successful it is now sold in both the men's and women's departments, so women can buy it for their partners.

It's bestselling item is a \$185 serum that, when it launches at Space NK in the UK this month, will cost £340. "If a product works for a man, he will spend the money," says Barry Alford, co-founder of the brand with Jefferson Hoffman.

Indeed, many in the men's wear business see the downturn as a time of opportunity rather than restriction. "There's room for sustainable expansion in the men's wear industry," says Anna Zagra, image director of Ermeseghio Zagra. "The brands that are strong in this current climate should utilize the moment to gain market share."

It is tempting to cast men's wear as some sort of saviour of the fashion industry, but beware: even if men are spending money now, they are doing so in the same way that they have always done. "There are no new ideas about men's wear," says Lucas Ossendrijver, the men's wear designer for Lanvin's increasingly influential and popular line. "If they buy something, it's really because they need something."

As a result, says Ossendrijver, "I don't design a look. I design pieces. The pieces themselves should be special and should be able to carry the price. It's not about a total outfit but the individual parts that make up a wardrobe."

Men can be "schizophrenic" shoppers, according to Sotheby's director of men's wear, David Walker Smith. "One week men will be cautious about buying suits, the next week they'll come in and buy loads. It's exciting as a business. It's survival of the fittest."

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A glimpse of eastern promise

Arabian fashion is leaving the privacy of the home and heading west. By Robb Young

More often than not, planet fashion casts a pretty distorted reflection onto the world, but, once in a while, it mirrors the bigger picture rather poignantly. Just one week after King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia met Gordon Brown at the G20 summit, one of the king's subjects, Amira Al-Jassim, was welcomed into another international and exclusive club: London's fashion fraternity.

While the timing was coincidental and the most pressing issue backstage at the inaugural Arabesque Fashion World event was probably nothing more than a missing handbag or two, the fact that Al-Jassim and four other designers from the Middle East brought their wares to a London audience underscores the evolution of the Arab world, shifting from faraway "wealth island" where European luxury brands could flag their merchandise to birthplace of a style heritage that can be exported back to the west.

"I expect that this event will be at least a promotional strategy for us and a testing ground for the market in London," said Al-Jassim at last Monday's lavish group show at the Park Lane InterContinental Hotel. "Besides, women everywhere like to be different and are always looking for something unique. So here I am presenting a collection that is just that."

Interpretations of the region's Bedouin costume tradition are still essential building blocks for many women's wardrobes. To wit: Al-Jassim's fluid European, Ottoman

and Indian silhouettes in colourful textiles beset with trimmings. But while there's no question that some of her gypsy blouses, bikers and column dresses with chain detailing could become bohemian evening wear for the Chelsea set, it's hard not to wonder if now is really the right time for such specialty items to hit the contrasting UK and European markets.

"I don't think [the recession] will have a major effect on small businesses like mine," said Al-Jassim, who, like Samira Haddouchi and Abed Mahfouz, two other designers at the show, relies on made-to-



Samira Haddouchi



Abed Mahfouz



Rabia Z

measure as the mainstay for her business. Indeed, Mahfouz believes that by targeting the dual riches of international high society and Arabs living in Europe, a London launch makes perfect sense despite the faltering economy.

"Although the Arab community has been in London for a long time, I believe they still have contrasting tastes and nostalgia for their mother countries," said Mahfouz. "Of course, this doesn't prevent some Arab ladies from being partial to occidental styles, but it also means the opposite is true - some Europeans are bound to be missing designs from Arabia."

Hence, dresses in oversized floral prints, soft layered tailoring and svelte trousers given combinations were all treated with a headscarf decoding the hijab from a perception of solemn severity to boundless variety. And like Zargaryar, Oscar Kashou's new combinations were all treated with a headscarf decoding the hijab from a perception of solemn severity to boundless variety. And like Zargaryar, Oscar Kashou's new combinations were all treated with a headscarf decoding the hijab from a perception of solemn severity to boundless variety.

"I am aware that my teachings have come from the UK, and so my design style is very western," said the designer, who has based his business in London while finishing a master's degree at Central Saint Martins. "However, in so many ways my brand is also very Middle Eastern in its use of textures and strong colours." Apparently in fashion, as in so many other areas of trade, "the markets don't have to be mutually exclusive".

Mark Doum