



FASHION

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Illustration: Wilson Tsang

Style bites

Thanks for coming
Mercibeaucoup has opened its first freestanding store in Kowloon. Covering more than 1,000 sq ft, the store (below) will carry the label's entire collection designed by Eri Utsugi. Mercibeaucoup, 1/F Silvercord, TST, tel: 2735 3062.



Join the club
Club Monaco has opened its first major Asian store in Hong Kong. The store occupies more than 6,500 sq ft and will carry Club Monaco's entire collection of men's and women's clothing and accessories. The store was designed by New York-based Kramer Design Group, with a minimalist, urban aesthetic. Club Monaco, G/F New World Tower, 16-18 Queen's Road Central, tel: 2118 2989.

More wardrobe space
Melaine Living Arts has opened an adjoining store called Melaine Wardrobe. The 2,800 sq ft store (below) will carry the label's signature clothing line. Melaine Wardrobe, 13 Lyndhurst Terrace, Central, tel: 2815 9183.



Golf partners
Polo Ralph Lauren has teamed up with LPGA golfer Morgan Pressel to release a limited-edition polo shirt for charity. Pressel will wear the shirt during tournaments in October for Breast Cancer Awareness Month and proceeds from sales will go to the Pink Pony Fund, which benefits cancer research and treatment. The polo shirt (HK\$890) will be available at the end of next month at all Polo Ralph Lauren boutiques, including Shop OT313, 3/F Harbour City, TST, tel: 2376 2881.

Juicy news
Juicy Couture has opened its third freestanding store in Hong Kong, in Causeway Bay. The 1,205 sq ft store (below) will carry the label's complete range of clothing, accessories, handbags, jewellery, sunglasses and shoes. Juicy Couture, Shop 317, Times Square, Causeway Bay, tel: 2118 2980.



Past designs
From this Sunday until the end of March, the Hong Kong Heritage Museum will host Fashion Attitude - Hong Kong Fashion Design. The exhibition, marking the handover, will showcase the work of nine established local designers, including Barney Cheng, Walter Ma and Lu Lu Cheung. Hong Kong Heritage Museum, 1 Man Lam Road, Sha Tin, tel: 2180 8188

Candy Soo

Designers and fashion editors are losing their influence as internet commentators become the trendsetters who decide what's hot and what's not, writes **Candy Soo**

New kids on the blog

The business of setting fashion trends used to be an elitist world where designers, fashion editors and buyers decided what was hot for the coming season. But those days are over. The public, armed with the power and speed of the internet, are having their say too - and fashion executives are taking notice.

Some sites average as many as 100,000 hits a day, while writers from sites such as glam.com, fashiontribes.com, Face Hunter and Coutourture are now accredited at many major fashion shows. The bloggers have arrived.

"Fashion blogging is an emerging phenomenon that the industry is coming to terms with," says Imran Amed, whose website, www.imranamed.com, focuses on the business side of the industry. Amed says there are now thousands of fashion blogs maintained by so-called prosumers, or professional consumers. "These blogs offer a new medium for discussing, promoting and selling fashion brands."

Tommy Fitzpatrick, who runs fashionologie.com, says the big appeal of blogs is that they can "move quickly and respond to news and new designer collections and brands within days or even hours".

Kelly Cook and Tina Craig run bagsnob.com, a site devoted to handbags. "Blogs can publish in an instant," says Cook. "It's the biggest advantage over traditional media, which can take months to compile. Sometimes, by the time magazines get to it, the trend might be over."

Blogs such as thesartorialist.blogspot.com also offer readers a subjective commentary on fashion trends, helping them see how fashion from the runways can translate to real life. And readers can offer their own opinions in return.

Handbag designer Rafe Totengco of Rafe New York (rafenewyork.blogspot.com) says his blog is popular because it's an intimate forum. "It's a more interactive channel for communicating with your audience," Totengco says. "They get to voice their opinions as well. Blogs are a more personal and immediate medium because they're a diary of sorts. You can read someone's point of view and then comment anonymously, whereas with traditional advertising you have to infer and interpret what you're looking at and there's no way to respond."

This two-way dynamic particularly helps fashion brands because bloggers and their readers are their target audience.

"We started our blog to reach women like us who love to shop and love bags," says Cook. "Now we have industry people and designers who are loyal fans as well. It makes sense because the two of us and our readers are their target customers. Knowing exactly how we feel about their collection is invaluable."

Fitzpatrick says blogs have such specific niche audiences that fashion labels are not only able to quickly gauge the response to their collections but also tailor advertising for particular blogs.

Online boutiques were among the first fashion companies to appreciate the potential value of blogs. Online boutique active endeavors.com advertises on internet celebrity Cory Kennedy's blog and offers readers a discount if they enter her name as a promotional code. Other online boutiques such as netporter.com, saksfifthavenue.com and shopbop.com have bought advertising space on bagsnob.com. But major fashion brands have been cautious about such targeted



advertising. "Blogs often have different audiences and different styles," says Fitzpatrick. "Labels should do their research on a particular blog before advertising."

Amed agrees. "Fashion blogs are inconsistent in terms of quality, tone, insight and professionalism," he says. "Many big fashion brands are rightfully concerned about protecting their brands."

"Most brands are already discussed on blogs, whether they like it or not. They may benefit from beginning to think about ways they can participate to reflect the image of the label in a manner they're happy with."

Brands that want to collaborate with blogs need to be aware that they don't all have the same type of readers - and that not all are professional. Amed says blogging won't suit all brands.

"Some brands become popular for the air of mystique they purposely cultivate," he says. "By starting a blog, brands are opening themselves up to commentary and engagement. They can't guarantee that the feedback and comments they receive will be positive, but they can at least take steps to ensure that the engagement is constructive and helpful for the brand."

And there's always the danger of bloggers providing incorrect information. Cook and Craig pride themselves on their accuracy, but the same can't be said for all blogs.

"Labels and readers need to be careful about wrong or misleading information about products," Cook

There are thousands of blogs all over the world discussing, promoting and selling the fashion brands

Imran Amed, online fashion commentator

says. "Many blogs don't fact check. There's no standard practice for blogging as there is for traditional news media."

Although established designer labels may be reluctant to collaborate with bloggers, blogs can be a boon for up-and-coming designers such as Sue Stemp, who is based in New York, and Eley Kishimoto in London.

"They're two examples of brand blogs that provide consumers with a window into the designer's world by sharing the daily interactions and experiences that inspire their collections," says Amed. "Other designers approach blogs for coverage because they can't afford to advertise in high-profile publications."

"Blogs have the capability to cover smaller, up-and-coming designers," says Fitzpatrick. "New brands approach me for a number of reasons: some want to buy advertising; some want to coordinate giveaways; some want me to consult on branding ideas; and some simply want to send me clothes to review."

Even magazines such as *Vogue* are turning to blogs, and labels such as Chanel and Yves Saint Laurent use the internet to supplement their marketing campaigns.

But do fashion blogs have the potential to overtake traditional forms of advertising?

"Blogs won't replace magazines, dailies or television," says Amed. "They're simply an additional communication channel to consider with benefits and drawbacks."

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Origins: Kris Van Assche

Who started it?

Kris Van Assche was born in Londerzeel, Belgium, in 1976. As a teenager, he saw Madonna perform during her *Blond Ambition* Tour, and was inspired by her costumes - which were designed by Jean Paul Gaultier - to pursue a career in fashion design.

In 1994, he entered the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp, where his focus on elegance above extravagance won him a reputation for seriousness among his tutors. After his graduation show in 1998, he moved to Paris, where he worked as a design assistant at Yves Saint Laurent. There, he met designer Hedi Slimane, who later became his mentor.

Slimane convinced Van Assche to move with him to Dior Homme, where



they continued their collaboration, working together until 2004, when Van Assche left to set up his own label. He held his first menswear collection in autumn/winter 2005.

Today, the label is distributed at high-end retailers worldwide, including Printemps in Paris, Luisa Via Roma in Florence, Loveless in Tokyo and Jeffrey

NY in New York. Earlier this year, Van Assche was asked to return to Dior to take over Hedi Slimane's role as artistic director. His debut collection for Dior Homme was shown last month.

The look:

Van Assche's design philosophy focuses on men who like to put in the effort to dress well. His work is characterised by attention to detail, and a nonchalant sartorial style.

His spring 2007 menswear collection featured Bermuda and gym shorts paired with golf tees. His clothes are known for the attention he pays to small details such as buttoned-up belt loops. He also presented a womenswear collection for the first time, called Hello Girls, which

included vests, suit jackets and harem pants.

Who wears it?

Jude Law, Brad Pitt, Chris Martin, Tilda Swinton and Justin Timberlake have all worn his pieces in fashion magazines, at events or privately.

What else can I buy?

There's a small line of accessories, including trainers, necklaces, belts and ties.



Trivia:

Van Assche also regularly creates pieces for art installations and performances. In June, he adorned 40 square metres of footpath in central Paris with aromatic plants and flowers as his contribution to the Flowers in the City installation.

Where can I buy it?

Kris Van Assche is available exclusively at Harvey Nichols, the Landmark, Central, tel: 3695 3388

Christopher Jenkins