

Brenda Polan examines Britain's ailing fashion industry

European Vogue



March is one of the months (October is the other) when the newspapers are full of pictures of unsmiling young women in unseasonal clothes. The breathless copy which accompanies the pictures is datelined Milan, London, Paris or New York and aims to tell us what we will be wearing in six months' time. It is, for the fashion world, collections time again.

Most newspaper readers could be forgiven for wondering what the clothes in the pictures have to do with

them or their local branch of Next - particularly at a time when their local branch of Next may be about to close as a result of the chancellor-induced slump in retailing.

The women in the clothes by Armani, Lacroix, Katharine Hamnett or Ralph Lauren are, however, the sparkling tip of a very large iceberg which is the fashion industry's selling season. At this time of the year, clothes are sold by manufacturers to the shops at every taste and price level.

For British manufacturers

and British shops this is going to be a windy March. Already the pressure is on within all retail organisations to cut risk to a minimum, buy only what can be sold - and to try to buy it cheaper.

The men and women who choose the clothes and accessories (shoes, scarves, belts, costume jewellery, tights, socks, handbags, etc.) which fill the department stores, high-street chains and the one-off boutiques, are called 'buyers'. Many do restlessly comb the world for the rare and wonderful to stock their shops; most, tightly budgeted, do their buying twice a year, in March and October.

Fashion mythology abounds with tales of hopeful young fashion-school graduates arriving unannounced in the executive offices of powerful and intimidating buyers, insisting on showing them the range of six garments they have sewed themselves in a chilly garret or back kitchen, and being catapulted to instant fame and fortune.

Maybe it has happened sometime, somewhere, but most orders are placed at trade fairs. There is a circuit of these, dotting the globe from Dusseldorf to New York, Hong Kong to Florence, Harrogate to Paris, Milan to London. Few buyers go to all or even most of them. It takes a sturdy-footed team to keep tabs on everything that is going on and most large retail organisations give each member of their often-enormous teams areas of special responsibility - evening wear, say, or knitwear. Even so, endless meetings, consultations, report-backs and strategy papers are necessary to ensure that a season's stock has a consistent rationale - that the consumer does not end up confused and reluctant to commit her Amex.

Of course, that's not the impression you get from the newspaper coverage. The top ready-to-wear designers (the Porsches and Lamborghinis of the fashion world) oblige the world's press by staging hugely-expensive, overproduced catwalk shows, sometimes featuring as many as

60 or 70 of the world's most beautiful women, the top models who really can (and often do) make an old potato sack look like the last word in chic.

The international designer shows take place on a smaller circuit than the one which serves the mass market: Milan, London, Paris, New York. Tokyo tried to elbow its way in on the top buyers' itinerary but, since its stars take their collections to Paris anyway, it never really made it. Even for the free-spending American buyers, Tokyo's hotels are too expensive and the traffic jams too incapacitating.

Paris, of course, was the home of the fashion show. It started as a comparatively

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modest affair where couture customers and a few chosen journalists (their hands in their laps, no pen or paper allowed) sat on fragile gilded chairs in a rococo mirrored salon to watch the house mannequins parade the season's new outfits. The 60s and ready-to-wear (off-the-peg) clothes changed all that. Show venues became more theatrical, the models learned to dance, choreographers were employed and audiences grew. Eventually designers let the photographers in. A big splashy photograph in the newspapers was, after all, free publicity.

Italy joined in, using Milan as the launch pad for a new generation of Italian designers who owed little to the couture tradition of Rome or the classical knitwear tradition of Florence. By the beginning of the 80s, Milan was established as a genuine rival to a complacent Paris. Following its decline in the 70s after its 1960s high, British fashion was on the threshold of its second great boom, providing the design ideas which fed a whole world industry, and it too decided, via an ad hoc voluntary organisation called the British Fashion Council (BFC), to

market itself with a programme of fashion shows. American buyers who had previously used the gap between the Milan and Paris shows to take a little holiday on Lake Como, booked into Claridges instead.

The excitement, the drama of the international collections circuit, attended as it is by its army of fashion victims, exhibitionists and overemotional camp followers, provided glamour which gave an identity to a whole industry and helped to sell the products of the middle and down-market as well. London did particularly well when the 30 or so top designers staged their shows in a tent erected in a car park next to Olympia, where up to 300 high-quality, second-division fashion companies were exhibiting. This season the designers have decamped to a photographic studio near the Harrow Road.

It is a depleted band now. The designers of the year, Workers for Freedom, will show in the Mall Galleries, Betty Jackson at the Accademia Italiana gallery in Knightsbridge and Jasper Conran in his West End showroom. But, more significantly, Katharine Hamnett and John Galiano will not show in London at all. Having cast longing glances across the Channel, they have been welcomed by the Chambre Syndicale and will show in Paris.

The top British designers have always done only a fraction of their business in Britain. Italy, France, America, Japan and Germany all have enormous and enthusiastic domestic markets, the bedrock of their business. That has never been true in Britain, where the market for high-quality clothing is very small. British designers and manufacturers of high-quality cashmere, raincoats or whatever, must export.

The canny men and women who run Paris's Chambre Syndicale seem to reckon that, with the coming of the single European market, there must be one European fashion capital and one alone. They have not generously adopted Hamnett and Galiano; they

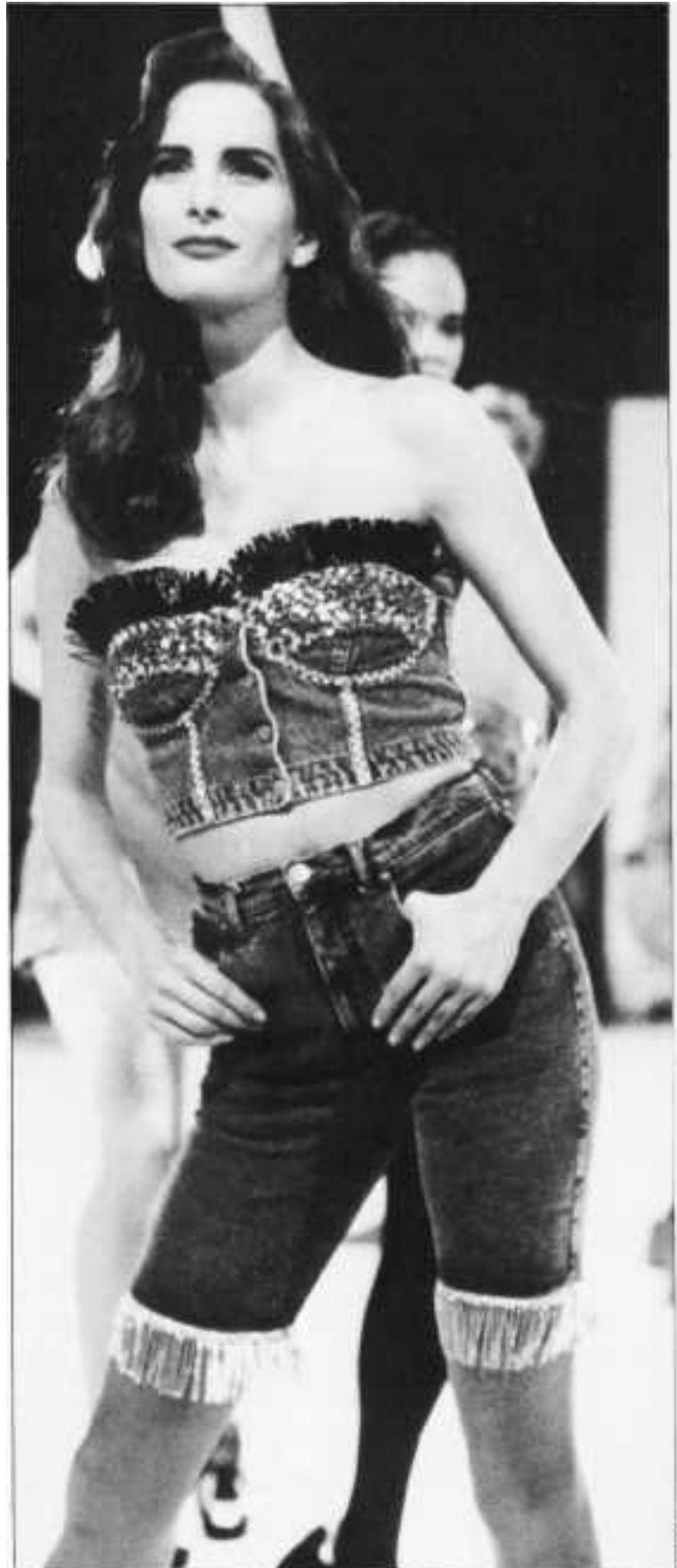
have seduced them in the same way that they seduced the Italians, Romeo Gigli and Gianni Versace. When the trickle of talent to Paris becomes a flood, there will be buyers who, with a sigh of relief, will cross both Milan and London off their exhausting itineraries.

The British Fashion Council always saw its promotion of the top designers as a promotion of the whole domestic industry. There's nothing innately wrong with producing year after year of well-trained design graduates to staff the studios of the rest of the world, contributing thereby to the wealth-creation of other countries. It is, however, a waste of a national resource. The BFC hoped also to promote the growth of a British-based fashion industry which could impress the world with its product and bring the money home. But the entrepreneurs, the managers and the imaginative manufacturers never emerged.

In fact, the great growth industry of the 80s was design consultancy. These businesses peddled shop decor, images, concepts, ideas - the sizzle not the sausage. The design consultancies are laying off staff and the few that are public have reported drops in profit. Increasingly it is beginning to look as if, in the 90s, the consumer will be chewing the sausage a little more thoughtfully.

This is going to make all markets more competitive. It is not good enough to say, as some fashion-scene observers do; well, we've had our turn, now it's Paris's turn again, it's all cyclical. The buying habits established in the early 90s - as Europe moves towards an economic unity which will very likely ultimately embrace Eastern Europe - will not be easily changed.

British fashion needs to deliver both the sausage and the sizzle. It has to elbow its way into the marketplace which has suddenly become nastier and tougher. The gloomy prognosis is that it won't be able to manage it. This March could finally concentrate a few minds.



Katharine Hamnett: Deserting the London shows