

February 20, 2013 1:10 pm

London Fashion Week hits PR jackpot

By David Hayes

British designers have never had it so good



Models on the catwalk during the Maria Grachvogel autumn/winter 2013 London Fashion Week show

George Osborne's austerity cuts are only just beginning to bite and the UK economy may be on the brink of dropping in to an unprecedented triple-dip recession at any moment but, ironically, over in British fashion land they've never had it so good.

On the surface at least London Fashion Week is on the up, garnering the kind of global attention it has not had in decades. Dig a little deeper and it's clear these are still tough times – UK retail sales dropped 0.6 per cent last month and even handbag mega-brand Mulberry saw profits fall 36 per cent last year – but in terms of public relations, London Fashion Week hit the jackpot this season.

First there was a small matter of the Tom Ford show coming to town. Until now the one-man brand had kept his presentations small and closely guarded from the prying eyes of all but a few editors, but this time round he decided to stage one of the swishest shows London has ever seen, complete with bucketloads of champagne, lines of flaming torches and an army of black-suited male models to usher guests to their gilt chairs in the Georgian splendour of Lancaster House. And the clothes? Well let's just say that Mr Ford's take on global fusion even managed to out-bling the surroundings.

Add in the fact that American designer L'Wren Scott also decided to move from New York to London – via a presentation in Paris last season – with a show that not only served up her ultra-glamorous, ultra-feminine designs (inspired by Gustav Klimt this season) but a shepherd's pie lunch and her significant other Mick Jagger, and a pretty impressive trend was emerging. It was only bolstered by luxury giant PPR's recent acquisition of 51 per cent of the buzzy Brit label Christopher Kane, which made London fashion suddenly look bankable on an international scale. And indeed, Mr Kane's upscaled, if overlong, collection of camouflage prints, lace and outsized crystals shown on Monday was impressive.

Still, as fashion moves into the virtual sphere – both in terms of sheer click-to-buy selling and as an instant global showcase – real geographical location is becoming less and less relevant, as the London crew are well aware. Hence the fact that “60 per cent of London's show are live-streamed”, says Caroline Rush, the chief executive of the British Fashion Council, who works closely with new chairman and internet supremo Natalie Massenet.

Leading the way, of course, has been Burberry, and this season the big news was the introduction of a personalised name tag that could be attached to various pieces – available to order direct from the catwalk.

Pity the same innovation had not been ploughed into the clothes, however: Christopher Bailey's “Trench Kisses” collection of 20-plus variations on ye olde raincoat seemed rather thin on ideas, with the use of latex – yes, he really is pandering to the rubber mac brigade – and lots of heavy brass detailing the only newsworthy additions. (Not that Mr Bailey is alone in his rubber fixation; madcap Meadham Kirchhoff likewise mixed the shiny black stuff with Victoriana to more unsettling effect.)

High street giant Topshop also embraced the online experience, bolting on a whole host of added extras to the live streaming of its

Topshop Unique show including “model cams” attached to stars Cara Delevingne and Jourdan Dunn, the better to reveal the nail varnish (buyable straight from the show) as well as the collection’s key themes: shiny vinyl fabrics, slouchy knits and on-trend shades of soft pink, grey and black.

And as for what London used to be known for: cutting edge creativity? There was plenty of that too. Mary Katrantzou swapped whimsy and eye-popping colour for a sombre mood and ghostly Victorian landscape prints to winning effect, while Erdem too embraced the dark with an exquisite collection of mainly black dresses lifted with the odd hit of sour green and blush pink. By contrast, Peter Pilotto flew the flag for colour with signature print dresses, and Jasper Conran, Paul Smith, John Rocha and Matthew Williamson were all thinking pink with neat sixties shifts, masculine tailoring, oversized felted wools and ombré effects inspired by the northern lights respectively.

Married design duos Preen and Clements Ribeiro both channelled a punk vibe, albeit with a very ladylike finish, and Jonathan Saunders, Roksanda Ilincic and Henry Holland – as well as new girl Simone Rocha – all embraced the plastic fantastic.

Finally, Richard Nicoll went for pared down grey, as did JW Anderson with a collection of offbeat minimalism, Marios Schwab looked to pre-Raphaelite-velvet for gowns and Giles and Osman went for gold. Literally.

Mulberry, however, embraced the metal metaphorically, by dramatically up-luxing its offering. The new Suffolk bag in Oxblood Alligator, shown on the catwalk with the label’s chunky knits and tweeds, will cost a cool £18,000 when it hits store later in the year. Let’s just hope all the hype will bring the world to London – and that they bring their credit cards with them.

RELATED TOPICS [United Kingdom](#) [London](#)

Printed from: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/b9346894-7b51-11e2-8eb3-00144feabdc0.html>

Print a single copy of this article for personal use. Contact us if you wish to print more to distribute to others.

© THE FINANCIAL TIMES LTD 2013 FT and ‘Financial Times’ are trademarks of The Financial Times Ltd.