

THE SHIFT

LONDON'S FASHION EVOLUTION

Over the past decade, a group of largely independent designers has changed the city's style from wild child to grown-up glamour. Now they are starting to reap the rewards.

BY HARRIET QUICK ILLUSTRATION BY ALESSANDRA OLANOW



JUST BEFORE LONDON'S September fashion week, the designer Erdem Moralioglu opened his first store on South Audley Street in Mayfair—a 2,000-square-foot space on two stories, complete with a Victorian fern garden; Alvar Aalto seating; art by David Hockney, Andy Warhol and Jean Cocteau; and a harlequin-pattern marble floor. That same week, designer Simone Rocha opened her flagship on nearby Mount Street—the opposite side of town from grungier East London, where both live and work. These were just the latest advances by London-based designers including Roksanda Ilincic, Christopher Kane, Victoria Beckham and stiletto master Nicholas Kirkwood, all of whom recently established their first boutiques in their hometown. For these largely independent players, the expansion into brick-and-mortar is intensely personal. “I wanted the feel of a *pied-à-terre*,” says Moralioglu, who owns his business outright and designed the space with his

architect boyfriend, Philip Joseph.

These days, there is more to British design than the punkish provocation and unwearable experimentation for which it was once known. Instead, fashion designers are remodeling themselves as savvy entrepreneurs building businesses that bridge the creative-commercial gap. They have their sights set on becoming global luxury brands, complete with retail stores, e-commerce and products in a wide array of categories, including eyewear, handbags and shoes. But unlike in years past, when rising stars such as Stella McCartney and Alexander McQueen felt pressure to leave London for established fashion capitals like Paris in order to succeed, this generation is following the lead of powerhouse Burberry and staying local. Today, the city has proven enough of a lure that Alexander McQueen returns from Paris this month to present its fall 2016 collection.

Among the 78 collections shown in London this

past fall were standouts such as Moralioglu's wild-flower-embroidered gowns with undone buttons, Ilincic's candy-colored silk trousers and blouses and Christopher Kane's pop art-inspired pieces. Mary Katrantzou sent out tailored separates threaded with metallic ribbon, while maverick talent Jonathan Anderson, who won both men's- and women's-wear designer of the year at the 2015 British Fashion Awards, showed ribbed knit pantsuits and oversize black-and-white pinafores. Such an array was worth celebrating, and first lady Samantha Cameron—in her role as British Fashion Council ambassador—opened No. 10 Downing Street for a party co-hosted with BFC chairman (and Net-a-Porter founder) Natalie Massenet. Among the guests were Salma Hayek and her husband, François-Henri Pinault, CEO of fashion conglomerate Kering, along with Naomi Campbell, Alexa Chung and Anna Wintour.

“When I started I had the support of a small >

community—Erdem, Christopher Kane, Jonathan Saunders—we all went through that difficult early time together,” says Ilincic, who launched with dramatically proportioned eveningwear in 2005. “We were seen as the ‘kids,’ who had little commercial sense. Now London is much more business-oriented, but the creativity is not lost,” adds Ilincic, who says sales for last season’s collection were up 49 percent.

For all their camaraderie, these designers have highly contrasting aesthetics. “London is full of strong individual voices,” says Moralioglu. “There’s a sense of fearlessness, and I felt that 10 years ago.”

Their voices are as varied as their backgrounds. Ilincic hails from Serbia and has become known for her architectural silhouettes and striking use of color, while Moralioglu is Turkish-British and grew up in Canada before moving to London at 23 to study fashion at the Royal College of Art. Greek-born Katrantzou trained at the Rhode Island School of Design before moving to London, where she transferred to Central Saint Martins and developed her signature kaleidoscopic prints. Kane (who sold 51 percent of his company to Kering in 2013) is a Scotsman whose fans include First Lady Michelle Obama and alternative music star FKA Twigs. Rocha, the Irish-born daughter of Chinese-Portuguese designer John Rocha, has shown a knack for subverting the codes of femininity with her elaborate, conceptual designs. And eight years into the fashion business following a career as a pop star, Beckham opened her flagship boutique on London’s Dover Street in 2014. Her range, which she presents as part of New York Fashion Week, spans sunglasses, denim, handbags and shoes as well as sister line Victoria by Victoria Beckham.

What they share are modest beginnings and educational roots (many earned their master’s degrees at Central Saint Martins under the late, influential professor Louise Wilson). All launched between five and 10 years ago, when McQueen and McCartney

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had already established their reputations elsewhere. Fashion editors were known to fly in to London for 24 hours to catch the Burberry show as well as a small clutch of upcoming names, then depart.

At the time, the notion of running a major brand from the city was a utopian dream. “I was working in Hackney from the Centre for Fashion Enterprise studios, sometimes sleeping under the table in bubble wrap,” says Katrantzou, laughing. Her 2008 debut consisted of eight shift dresses. “I took the orders on the back of a press release—I didn’t even have a price structure,” she recalls. “But I got orders from stores like Colette and Joyce, and from Mrs. Burstein,” the fashion-forward owner of British boutique Browns.

The nascent London scene steadily gained traction. “Eight years ago, when I launched my first collection of 10 dresses, I was designing clothes that



I wanted to wear,” says Beckham. “At the time, we were three, and now we are 150.” As for Katrantzou, she now has 220 stockists (the U.S. is her biggest market), a turnover of \$15 million and 55 employees, including a new CEO, Trino Verkade, who was previously at Thom Browne.

“When London Fashion Week was not so well-attended, the designers had the time and space to grow their brands,” says Lauren Santo Domingo, co-founder of online retailer Moda Operandi. “Now it’s become incredibly exciting as these designers hit their stride, offering editors and buyers great design and business partners.”

Such growth has been buoyed by a system of sponsorships, awards and mentorship programs that aim to safeguard young designers through their teething years. Ilincic and Rocha debuted their first collections thanks to a not-for-profit talent incubator, Fashion East. In 2008, the BFC, host of the British Fashion Awards, established the Vogue Designer Fashion Fund,

granting a winner approximately \$300,000 and mentorship, which has gone to Moralioglu, Kane, Kirkwood and, most recently, Katrantzou. Red-carpet patronage from actresses such as Keira Knightley and Sienna Miller has also helped get attention, while e-commerce sites including Net-a-Porter and Moda Operandi give the brands a global retail platform. Even so, the dangers are real: London-based designer Thomas Tait, considered an emerging talent and the winner of the inaugural LVMH Prize, in 2014, has announced he will no longer stage a runway show and is recalibrating his business model.

For some of the designers, a capital infusion from outside investors has been critical. In 2012, when Kering approached Kane with an offer, “We were stretched and I was tired,” the designer told me last year. “When I met with François-Henri Pinault, it felt

CAPITAL IDEAS Highlights from London-based designers’ spring 2016 collections. From left: Christopher Kane; Roksanda; Mary Katrantzou; Erdem; Victoria Beckham; Simone Rocha.

organic. The investment has allowed me to concentrate on what I’m good at,” he said at the time. Thus far, Kane has been able to expand his team from 22 to 60, make crucial hires (such as CEO Sarah Crook, a former vice president of Stella McCartney, in 2014) and launch accessories lines and e-commerce. Last spring he opened a marble-clad flagship on Mount Street by minimalist architect John Pawson. “It gives us the chance to showcase our collections and establish a direct relationship to our customer; we can see how they navigate the store and shop the brand, which we cannot get from wholesale,” says Kane, who this year will release his first advertising campaign.

Even with such investment, things do not always go as planned. Scottish designer Jonathan Saunders received funds for his 11-year-old line in 2015 from Eiesha Bharti Pasricha, the daughter of Indian billionaire Sunil Mittal. Yet within the year they jointly decided to close it down—for “personal reasons,” said Saunders. The minority investment by Pasricha in Ilincic’s line looks rosier: The influx of cash allowed Ilincic to upgrade the plans for her Mayfair space and hire architect David Adjaye. Like Kane, Ilincic has found the store to be a useful laboratory for observing her clients. “What’s interesting is the request for a much broader range: high fashion as well as everyday, versatile pieces,” she says. The British label Peter Pilotto, known for decorative prints and modernist silhouettes, is also benefiting from a minority deal with Escada owner Megha Mittal (no relation to Sunil Mittal).

“I still pinch myself every time I go into my store,” says Beckham. Over the years, she adds, “I’ve gotten to know my customer and what she wants. It’s less about me as a celebrity—people do now see me as a designer.” Beckham will open a Hong Kong store this year and has locations in Dubai and New York in the pipeline. “To build my brand, I had to learn how to walk before I could run,” she says. “I’m still an independent U.K. brand, just operating on a global scale.” ●