



Paul Smith's clothes combine classic elegance with a hint of youthful individuality – a trait the designer feels is sadly lacking in the majority of today's fashions. Interview by **Paul Keers**

Man and boy

Up in the rafters of his main shop, high above Floral Street, Covent Garden, is Paul Smith's den. There's no designer minimalism here; this is a sort of converted attic, cluttered with pictures, books, framed objects, toys: the accumulated bits and pieces of a lifetime's boyhood. Paul Smith, designer man and boy – only not consecutively, but man and boy at the same time.

Most British men have an idea of Paul Smith's style. It's sharp but playful, slightly quirky: 'classic with a twist' as people delight in saying. (This is fashion-speak meaning it's straightforward enough for ordinary people to buy and wear, but with just a little touch to give it individuality without scaring the boss.) But unlike many designers, Paul is actually better than his observers at defining his own style. 'It's a cocktail of classics and tradition with a love of street fashion,' he says. 'Sort of Mr Bean meets Savile Row'.

It's a combination that has proved phenomenally successful. From a single shop in Nottingham in 1970, his company now has a worldwide annual turnover of £173 million, eight shops in London, and another dozen around the world. And with more than 200 Japanese outlets, he's also big in Japan.

Quite apart from the expansion of his menswear label, Paul has also made increasing excursions into new areas of design, from childrenswear to bags and watches, from spectacles to Paul Smith Women. He's just designed the World Bar in Paris, and later this year will see the launch of Paul Smith perfume and cosmetics. 'Even though it's locked into the conveyor belt of the fashion seasons,' he says, 'I've got a very busy mind.'

Perhaps more than any other fashion designer, Paul Smith provides ingredients for people to combine in their own, individual style. You decide just how loud you want the volume to be. As he says, 'My stuff is mostly logo free, so it's about customers buying it and wearing it in their own way. And if people come through my door wanting to show their colours, then it's all there for them.'

Individual expression is now more important than ever. When Paul Smith looks around, he sees the quirky and

Portrait *Andrew Montgomery*

unusual spreading around the globe in internet time, the individual and different becoming mass market in the time it takes to say Starbucks.

Paul was the first to put one-off items under a glass case in his shops. 'We were absolutely the pioneers of that,' he agrees. 'In our first little shop in Floral Street, we had one black cabinet, and I used to put in various things I just found on my travels. It wasn't done for money, it was to make the shop more interesting really. It might be some pencils, or scissors, or 20 farmer's penknives from Tuscany, and they'd be gone in two days. I used to go to Paris, to little shops with ideas you couldn't get anywhere else, and I would literally get goosebumps with the excitement of it.'

'Now, something that's new and different goes global within an hour and a half. Someone comes up with a concept, like Prada, or Belgo, and it just gets rolled out, so it's the same in Paris or wherever. And I'm not sure whether that's really a good thing. It leaves a lot open for something fresh and different – but finding fresh and different is hard when formulas spread out so quickly.'

He feels sheer availability is in danger of stifling the self-expression that was always a part of British youth. 'There was a time you couldn't get a decent espresso, or focaccia or whatever, outside London,' he explains. 'Everything is so available now. And I worry... no, that's too strong; it makes me wonder. When 11-year-olds are 20, will they be, like, "been there, done it, seen that"?' By the time they're teenagers, kids have already travelled on a plane, been abroad, eaten in nice restaurants, seen somebody beaten up or killed on TV. And it's the Armstrong thing: I've done the moon – now what?'

'My way to deal with that is the constant push of, love of, individuality. Even if I have a big expansion, and open lots of shops, I always like to give each one its individuality.'

There is indeed a world of difference between, say, the dark wood interiors of his Floral Street shops, and the cool, almost minimal stone and glass design of the 'shop within a house' he opened on Kensington Park Road. Yet all are full of strange finds, just as his clothes contain their own little twists – as bold as lairy prints, or as subtle as contrasting button-holes. 'A lot of British design has polarised



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into either seriousness or humour,' he says. 'We've managed to retain the combination.'

That's what keeps Paul Smith in business at a time when so many clothes are becoming depressingly uniform. '18- to 22-year-olds are so boringly dressed,' he says. 'There's such a lack of individuality out there. You can list their kit – fatigue pants, a sloppy top, hi-tech jacket, trainers of course... or it's jeans with the crotch around the knees... or it's the City boy with a simple suit... it's sad there's not more experimenting. They're just uniforms.'

'In the '50s, '60s and '70s, British youth were expressing themselves through an effort, and an individuality, in the way they looked. They were saying that they didn't want to look like their Dad, saying: "I am me". Well, we've got a massive young following; we've somehow managed to retain the youth, and I think it's because of our playfulness and our eccentricity.'

The fashion writer Sally Brampton once wrote that Paul Smith isn't childish, but he is childlike, and it's a description that pleases him. When he's getting excited about his new Mr Bendy driving shoes, enthusing about multi-patterned boxer shorts, or injecting playfulness into a shirt, it's hard to believe he's 55 this year, and has done so much to transform British style. 'What I am most proud of is nudging the average British male into realising that it's OK to think about how you look,' he says.

'The next nudge could be to try and get people to think individually again.' ●



French dressing

Just around the corner from the Place de l'Opera in Paris is World Bar, Paul Smith's first venture into the world of cuisine. The bar offers good food, fine wines and, perched on the fifth floor of the Printemps department store, the perfect opportunity for a good dose of people-watching. And Paul has even been good enough to supply binoculars, which are suspended above the tables. Other typically quirky touches include walls covered in newspapers, all dated 5 July (Paul Smith's birthday of course), and eclectic mix-and-match furniture.

World Bar, Printemps Hausmann, 60-61 rue Caumartin, Paris; tel: +33 (0)1 42 82 78 02