

COURTINING COUTURE

In an exclusive interview with *Aficionado*, Sir Paul Smith reveals the problem with fashion designers today and why success doesn't just rely on creativity.

BY VINEETHA MENON

Sir Paul Smith never dreamt of going into fashion, but when he did he approached it with a healthy dose of practicality, something he says sets him apart from other designers.

"The key point about my career really has always been that right from the beginning I did two, three or four things at the same time to retain vision of my main collection, but also support myself financially by doing lots of other freelance jobs. Doing the jobs were great because you actually learnt about the practicality of paying the rent and doing things that work, so that's quite unique in fashion – a lot of the designers are great at design, but they don't really understand the practicality of a collection," the respected knighted designer tells *Aficionado* in an exclusive interview.

His foray into the world of designing is well known. Cycling was always Smith's passion until an accident crashed his professional racing ambitions. Instead, it led to him discovering a world of creativity. At first he learnt the ins and outs by setting up a small boutique for his friend, before meeting his girlfriend (now wife) Pauline Denyer, who he says, "really taught me everything I know". It was Denyer, a fashion designer from the Royal College of Art in London, who convinced him to open his own store at 10 Byard Lane, Nottingham, the UK.

"I saved up a very small amount of money and managed to rent this very tiny room, about three square metres, with no windows, and I called it a 'shop'. It was only open Fridays and Saturdays, and the rest of the time I did other jobs like being a freelance stylist, colourist, designer," he reminisces. "It was a very modest beginning, but it was wonderful, because from a young age I actually understood the balance between creativity and practicality, opening a shop at 10 o'clock in the morning and closing it at 6 o'clock at night, and understanding about how to make the shop interesting, moving stock around and how to communicate with the customers."

Not many know that Smith didn't actually design any clothes for the first few years.

"Obviously, I helped and I selected the fabrics and we sold the clothes together – but it was really Pauline designing the clothes in the beginning. Eventually, she wanted to pursue her love of art and went back to art school, and I suddenly found myself a designer on my own," he explains. "I had to pull my socks up." And he did.

From showing their first collection in 1976 in a small hotel in Paris, sleeping in the showroom to save money, to becoming a respected fashion icon with shops around



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PAUL SMITH ON THE STATE OF FASHION

There is a lot of imitation happening very quickly. The industry has changed in the fact that there is a lot of big brands and chains that have 2,000 shops around the world that do really good low-cost fashion, so that is a big challenge for a catwalk designer. You need to always do interesting things outside of just fashion and that is why I think Paul Smith has done so well, because I do photography, collaborations and other things, so people are fascinated.

The thing is there is not much excitement in fashion as there used to be because now all of those big companies are everywhere. When I started out, I used to go to Paris and get excited to see a shop where there was only one in the whole world, but now everybody is so distributed. So many brands have hundreds of shops and, in a way, it is a bit disappointing; there is not as much uniqueness as there used to be.





the world. Still, he's grateful for the experience and feels blessed to have lived in the inspiring 60s era.

"I was visiting London on a regular basis. It was a very inventive time, nicknamed Swinging London. There was a lot of creativity and it was when people like the Rolling Stones, the Beatles and Led Zeppelin and Pink Floyd were starting out – a very unusual era. I was blessed with witnessing a very creative age," he explains, when comparing it to the world today. "Everything is so immediate now; everything gets so homogenised so quickly. I think the [Swinging London] era was really interesting because it was very much about individuality, about being your own man and not cluttering your head with what other people were doing. That is pretty hard to do today; there is not much freedom of thought."

"The problem with so many of the young designers is they think that they immediately should have a fashion show, a press office, a shop and, unfortunately, a lot of them fall by the wayside because, as you know, there are just far too many products in the world – you've got to have a point of view, something unique, which is consistent."

With a career that spans more than 40 decades, Smith knows what he's talking about.

"One of the hardest things is continuity, Andy Warhol said everyone could be famous for 15 minutes, and what he meant by that is you can have something happening in your life, which is a high point, but keeping that high point going is really difficult – it could be love, it could be success, could be money, health or sport; but keeping it going for a length of time is the key point and that is what, amazingly, I've managed to somehow do."

"We have never ever gone backwards," he adds emphatically. "We have always increased our sales, and expanded in a modest way every year. We are still completely self-financed; we've never borrowed any money so Paul Smith is so unique," he says with a hint of pride.

Even today, Smith does everything from designing his many diverse lines to working on special collaborations – all in his very messy office.

"It is quite full of things," he admits. "There are about 5,000 books, 2,000 toys, nine bicycles [laughs]. . . people expect me to sit in a sort of minimal, black-and-white studio or empty office, but then they don't want to leave because it is so full of interesting things; things that are so magical and exciting." Just like the man himself.

Paul Smith may be a legend in the fashion world but he is, genuinely, the nicest man.

"My wife says I am still the guy she fell in love with when she was 27. I've never really had an ego. . .," Sir Paul Smith muses. "I'm just an ordinary bloke." ■

