



PAUL SMITH

MORE THAN JUST A NAME

With the launch of his brand new Junior collection, we talk to one of Britain's most successful designers, whose 'classic with a twist' style remains a firm favourite, more than thirty years after its inception.

Words: Fiona Collins



Paul Smith is one of those designer brand names, so universally known and yet so quintessentially English, that one might well wonder - or those at least for whom fashion is not a first language - whether Paul Smith is indeed a person, or in fact a prosaic marketing name dreamt up to reflect the Britishness of a brand which prides itself on its stylish, sharply tailored, and very wearable clothing lines.

Yet Smith, or Sir Paul as he has become known since his knighthood in 2000, is very much more than just a name. Born in Nottingham in 1946, Smith is as hard working as his own label, which now enjoys wholesale success in more than 35 countries worldwide. Whilst perhaps lacking some of the artistic pretensions of his more flamboyant designer counterparts, it is Smith's grounded, businesslike and entrepreneurial approach to fashion that has seen his empire flourish.

"The secret to success is keeping your feet on the ground," Sir Paul says firmly. "Accountants should be trained to see both sides of the picture; finance and creativity." With his credentials as a businessman (his brand has an annual turnover of more than



£340 million), Smith has always kept a sensible head on his statuesque shoulders, and has never let creativity impede sound judgement.

"The Paul Smith way started innocently, and came about because of my love of craftsmanship, tradition and Britishness, but also my love of humour," he says. "Because of this, 'classic with a twist' was born, and now it is a very over-used phrase, but still very relevant today."

Indeed, in Smith's latest collection, classically-cut khaki checked jackets are paired with red and purple chequered trousers and dramatic, overly-tall bowler hats, in a style described as "an elegant, detailed collection that references the modern bohemian gentlemen."

One might well use the same phrase to describe Smith himself.



Born to working class parents in the town of Beeston, just south of Nottingham, Smith left school at 15 to begin work at a local fabric warehouse. The job was not undertaken as an early calling to the fashion industry, but rather was borne of necessity. Having struggled with formal schooling, Smith needed to fund an altogether more energetic ambition.

"I aspired as a teenager to be a professional racing cyclist," says Smith, who at the time was clocking up to 300 miles a week as part of a rigorous training regime. "The dream was shattered after a bad accident when I was 17." In truth, the 'bad accident' was a horrifying smash with a car, which left Smith with such acute injuries that he was hospitalised for six months, and resulted in him being unable to bend his leg sufficiently to pedal a bicycle. "But to be honest I don't think I would have succeeded (as a cyclist), as I was not brave enough or strong enough," says Smith pragmatically. He is – perhaps understandably - not bitter about the hand that fate dealt him.

Opposite page: Sir Paul Smith; the man behind the name; Above from left; Autumn Winter 2010: Khaki check jacket, fish hook print shirt, purple shadow check trousers; Prussian blue two button suit, white shirt; Pale grey knitted shawl collar coat, camel crew knit, grey flannel trousers

During his recuperation, Smith "discovered the English pub" and it was here that he "met a lot of people that were at the local college of fashion and art, and that's what got me into fashion design."

At the height of the swinging sixties, Smith moved to London and met Pauline Denyer, a fashion graduate from London's Royal College of Art, whom he credits with guiding and inspiring him throughout his career (the pair finally married in 2000). Following evening tailoring classes, Smith joined Lincroft Kilgour in Savile Row, where he began to forge his early reputation as a stylish menswear designer. In 1970, with the help of Denyer, Smith finally opened his own store in his hometown of Nottingham.



Above from left: Brown Harris tweed jacket, pleated donegal wool corset dress, curved leather saddle belt, tweed flat cap, cashmere fingerless gloves and leather roll top boots; Black and pink organza water roses print fitted dress, black leather small Maggie bag, cashmere fingerless gloves and leather Mary Janes; Lilac felted wool circular dress, wide webbing belt and knee-high leather boots

His designs then, just as they are today, were inspired by the playful dandyism of that era; beautifully cut, tall, lean suits with characteristically cheeky detail such as lime green trimmings, floral linings and intricately woven maps of London on the interiors. Or androgynous looking, vivid pink suits finished with bright red linings and bowler hats, which he designed for his Spring / Summer 2010 Congo-inspired collection. Without ever quite crossing the line into the 'un-wearable' realms of haute couture, it is this cheerful individuality, which has been so key to Smith's enduring success.



"The fashion industry today is more competitive than ever," Smith says. "Especially with the addition of e-commerce sites and low cost high street brands that follow catwalk designs very closely. It's so important to have a real character to your brand; in our case it is reliability, continuity and always easy to wear clothes, but with a sense of humour."

By the early eighties, Smith had already begun to expand his business, and had successfully opened two stores in London. But it was his invitation to Japan in 1982, at the hands of a local licensing scout, that really launched Paul Smith as a global brand. At the height of the eighties fashion explosion in Japan, at a time when many European designers "looked at the country as something of a cash cow", Smith took the time to get to know its fashion industry from the inside out.



Speaking in an earlier interview, Smith said of the experience: "I was young and very keen. I'd make visits to the factory several times a year, which I believe was key to our success. I also designed pieces for the Japanese market from scratch; they were getting pure 'Paul Smith'."

The first Paul Smith store opened in Tokyo in 1984, and after early teething problems, the Japanese brand became so successful that Smith is now Europe's biggest selling designer in the country, with sales from Japan alone accounting for half his brand's annual sales. Smith's iconic status in the country meant that doors were flung open for him in Hong Kong, Korea, Singapore, Thailand and China.

Closer to home, Smith's brand was growing too, with ranges of shoes, fragrances, watches, pens, →



Clockwise from above: Paul Smith Junior range 2010: Mack wears a corduroy jacket, long sleeve t-shirt and jeans, Calypso wears a corduroy skirt, tights and cardigan; Willow in classic Paul Smith shorts, with shirt and fair isle cardigan; Finn shows off Junior's 'preppy' look, with corduroy jacket, shirt and jeans

furniture, rugs, china and spectacles all bearing his name. Ultimately, in 1994, Smith finally – if somewhat reluctantly – branched into womenswear.

“Women would ask, ‘Could you do men's clothes to fit us?’ But that wasn't really the truth,” he says. “They claimed they wanted just men's clothes, but then they'd say, ‘We need a skirt.’ ‘Can we have a dress?’” In the end, Smith played to his strengths and concentrated on tailored suits, coats and shirts, while an assistant designed the dresses and skirts. They still work this way today.

Which brings us to the present. The sub context for my interview today is the launch of Paul Smith's latest venture; his brand new ‘Paul Smith Junior’ collection, which is available from the end of August. With cheeky young models, and cheerfully coloured fabrics, Junior succeeds in being both playful and fun, whilst retaining Smith's trademark love of classic cut and line.

But the collection is “not about mini-me adults” as Smith puts it. “It's more about taking the spirit of what I do for men and women,” says Smith.

“For instance, on a boy's striped shirt there will always be a little secret that one day he will notice, like the inside of the cuff will be a different colour. For girls, it will be picking up on colours from the women's

collection – maybe literally one of the prints, or maybe just the feeling of the print.

“Junior is about very simple styling with the boys clothes, leaning towards more of a preppy look, and the girls; slightly more fashionable, easy to wear, but definitely not urban or rock.”

At 64, Smith's enthusiasm and verve for his fashion empire is as strong as ever, and three decades at the top of this notoriously fickle industry have done nothing to dim the integrity of his mission. “What I want with the business is for it to retain its character and have a heart; a business which is down to earth.” Smith is the embodiment of his own aspiration.

“I once read an obituary where a man was remembered for living ‘a clean and honest life and having had a sense of humour’ – I think that sounds quite nice!”

Paul Smith Junior will be available in stores from the end of August 2010. For more information visit: www.paulsmith.co.uk/collections/paul-smith-junior