

## FASHION

# Taken aback – but not by the surprises

**Vanessa Friedman**

Sometimes it is by sticking to their aesthetic that designers yield the truly unexpected

So Vladimir Putin won his election, and will probably embark on his third term as Russian president in May. Sometimes, in life as in fashion, things surprise you, and sometimes they happen just as expected.

It was surprising, for example, that designer Phoebe Philo at Céline eschewed a show for autumn/winter in favour of a showroom presentation. Or it was surprising in the fashion-is-big-business-and-the-show-is-an-invaluable-marketing-tool sense; not surprising in the human sense. (Ms Philo is eight months pregnant, and full-on runway shows are stressful.)

It was not surprising, however, that said presentation stuck to the aesthetic she has developed so precisely for the brand, and then grew it. Literally.

Inspired by the giant blockiness of brutalist architecture (according to the photo collages on each seat) and by the London of the mid-1990s (according to the music on the soundtrack), coats and sweatshirt tops were oversized. Those tops were often made in leather or PVC to convey a sense of structure, the coats in thick fabrications and fur or both, not to mention brightly coloured squares and stripes. The trousers were cut generously and slit open via zips at the



● HERMÈS



● STELLA MCCARTNEY



● GIVENCHY



● CÉLINE

knee, and a leather dress had zips running down the side seams of the torso like a racetrack.

If the shapes were a bit clunky, they also conveyed the sense of forward momentum that has powered Ms Philo's work.

Conversely, it was not surprising that Hermès

designer Christophe Lemaire chose to work almost exclusively with skins and silk – they are, after all, the hallmark of the house's famous bags and scarves – nor was it surprising, given Hermès' history as a saddlemaker, that he chose to plumb equestrian style;

specifically the gauché. The results might take some people aback. Boxy leather jackets over blouson leather-and-suede trousers, often ended in a sweatpant-style ribbing at the ankle, sometimes complete with a silk "tie" and generally reminiscent of 1980s power-dressing.

There were knit all-in-ones under grey tailored jackets, and sweeping duster coats. The scarf prints came in the form of walking sticks or tiny Russian mosaics, which formed the basis of silk peasant smocks over matching tights that looked very YSL in his gypsy years, and pretty good nevertheless.

Mostly, however, these were defiantly unsexy clothes and, though it makes sense to think the Hermès customer wants luxurious ease in her wardrobe, it would be surprising if that also meant unflattering.

And so it went. At John Galiano, it was a little surprising (and a little disappointing) to see designer Bill Gaytten stick so closely to the old Galiano formula, with Aubrey Beardsley-inspired dresses and blouses spilling ruffles under riding coats and over jodhpurs, as well as pleats galore and some gratuitously transparent evening dresses in chiffon

from India) or that, in its second season, even though the brand has pushed further with terrific pea coats and black mini-dresses capped by leather shoulders, it still needs to clarify its point of view.

By contrast, identity has never been a problem for Stella McCartney, whose focus on clothes that work in life thanks to an elevating ease was fully realised in a collection that merged baroque patterns and athletic details and functionality. (Ms McCartney collaborates with Adidas and is outfitting Team GB for the London Olympics.)

Similarly at Maiyet – a brand focused on creating artisan-entrepreneurs in challenged regions – it was not surprising to see the origins of the items listed in the programme (rings from Columbia, embroidery

with a few diamanté-bedecked ruffles at the neck and cascading down the hem. At Kenzo, it was surprising to see how cleverly the creative directors Humberto Leon and Carol Lim have updated and urbanised the brand's ethos into value-and-fun-for-money. Coats with primary-coloured knit sleeves unzipped at the waist to become jackets, and trousers were palazzo and striped. But it was not surprising to see they had embraced the use of new prints, specifically grapes in an arbour and an embroidered Kenzo lion.

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**Hermès**  
Christophe Lemaire plumbed equestrian style, specifically the gauché

**Stella McCartney**  
Jacquard mini-dresses were among clothes that work thanks to an elevating ease

**Givenchy**  
Riccardo Tisci on gender-bending form with satin jodhpurs trailing long trains

**Céline**  
Phoebe Philo's shapes conveyed her forward momentum

Pictures: Catwalking.com

Paris Fashion Week

tweed coats with ribbed tracksuit collars peeking out the top that segued into a finale of flippy dresses where the influences and fabrications added up to more than the sum of their parts. When imagination gets into equations, the results can surprise you.

See, likewise, Givenchy, where Riccardo Tisci was firmly in his usual Guy Bourdin/gender bending/fetishist mode (this isn't the unexpected bit).

The riding jacket and the tuxedo were the basis of the collection, and they came in various guises – peplumed at the back in triangular points, in fur with contrasting colours, with pockets on the tails – worn over leather shirts and lace slips. These in turn were worn under pleated skirts, the side panels made of sheer chiffon the better to show the hems of the slips, or leather jodhpur trousers or satin version of the same, trailing long trains.

It was about as cool a way to go to the ball as you can imagine, but what stood out was the odd coincidence of timing that saw the designer using the Soviet-style stars as decoration on leather sweatshirts, often adorned with dripping jewels, just as the Russian electoral results came in.

Someone might read a slyly ironic equation of leadership and the accumulation of riches into the look, not to mention all that Putin-favoured black leather. Prescience? Lucky accident? Subtle political commentary? Surprise.

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“To be and appeal.”

Giovanni La Croce, Milano

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## Leather goods

### Arnault eyes bags of potential in trunk-maker

After one of France's oldest trunk-makers, Moynat, was acquired and revived in 2010, the Machiavellian view was that the buyer planned to pit it against Hermès, the French leather company, writes **Shoba Narayan**.

The buyer was Groupe Arnault, the family holding company of Bernard Arnault, who also controls LVMH. And last year LVMH bought 22.3 per cent of Hermès – much to that brand's fury. The recently opened Moynat boutique is next door to Hermès on rue Saint-Honoré in Paris. And while the brand, founded in 1849, is not as old as Hermès, it is five years older than LVMH's crown jewel, Louis Vuitton.

A more charitable reason, and one espoused by Guillaume Davin, the Moynat chief executive, is that Mr Arnault wants to “preserve French heritage and craft”.

Moynat, which is very small and almost unknown outside France, began as a small atelier under Pauline Moynat. It developed a number of patents including for the use of hardened gutta-percha waterproofing, and used a wicker (“English trunk”) frame covered with canvas to reduce the weight of a trunk to below 2kg.

Moynat's glory years were 1900 to 1936, and the house closed its boutique in 1976. In the 1980s a series of owners planned to revive it: the Scholls; the Vuitton family; and Luvanis, which sold it to Arnault for an undisclosed amount.

As to why it was Arnault



The original curved design, to fit the shape of early cars, has been retained

features: handles with stops inside so that they would not fall on the leather; heavy metallic closures; and hidden exterior pockets on travel bags. He retained the signature Moynat touch: the curved trunks that were made to fit in early cars.

Prices vary from €2,700 to €15,000, and so far there is no advertising. “You wouldn't believe the number of French and Italian companies that existed before the war that have just disappeared,” says Mr Nair. “They have this fantastic heritage that marries French savoir faire and craftsmanship. Moynat is one of them.”

Snapping up small European brands with stagnant or obsolete business models has become a trend. In just over a year the Hong Kong-based Fung brands have bought Robert Clergerie, Delvaux and Sonia Rykiel – a French shoe brand, a Belgian handbag maker and a French ready-to-wear house respectively.

“The luxury market is undergoing a polarisation,” says Luca Solca, head of European research at Crédit Agricole Cheuvreux. He differentiates between mega-brands such as Louis Vuitton and Gucci and niche high-end brands such as Bottega Veneta.

“What you need to succeed in this space is credibility, which comes from a mix of heritage, high quality and high prices. Moynat seems to fit the bill, but the jury is out as to if it will succeed.”

that bought the house and not LVMH itself. Julian Easthope, managing director of luxury research at Barclays Capital in London, says: “It seems likely that Moynat was deemed too small for LVMH, where it could get lost, but would benefit more from the experience of a more private equity background in Groupe Arnault.

“I personally believe it unlikely that Mr Arnault would want to do anything to undermine a holding in Hermès that is worth €6bn to LVMH.”

The Moynat story bears this out. In early 2010, just after Mr Arnault bought Moynat, he invited Mr Davin, a 20-year veteran of LVMH, to view Moynat's archives and see if the brand had

potential. Mr Davin had just left the group with dreams of being an entrepreneur, but felt a “strong emotion” while going through the archives. “Moynat has the classic itinerary of a luxury brand,” he says, alluding to the atelier, the patents and its participation in the World's Fairs. “The curved shape of the trunk is both feminine and masculine. It was amazing to go through.”

Mr Davin brought in Ramesh Nair, a young creative designer who had just left Hermès, and gave him carte blanche. “No road map, no clear instructions. Mr Arnault wanted us to surprise him,” Mr Davin says.

They met Mr Arnault every week for 18 months. Mr Nair designed a line of bags and trunks with distinctive

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