

STYLE

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Model shift:

Could older be the new black?

Designers are casting models in their mid-20s and above at their shows as the fashion industry seeks to appeal more directly to its customers

BY SAMANTHA CRITCHELL
AP, NEW YORK

Among the more avant-garde looks shown on the runways of New York, London, Paris and Milan was one that seems ho-hum in real life: gray hair. More mature models — some even in their 40s — were stars at the previews of fall styles. And in the fashion world, that's a radical turn from the use of models not old enough to drive a car, let alone wield a credit card.

"I wanted something different," said Francisco Costa, creative director for the Calvin Klein Collection. "I wanted a cast that really represented a customer I design for, and that's not really a 16-year-old." Costa hired gray-haired Kristen McMenamy, who also appeared at Viktor & Rolf, as well as 1990s sensations — and now mothers — Stella Tennant and Kirsty Hume.

Marc Jacobs, widely considered the most influential American designer, cast 47-year-old Elle Macpherson in his Louis Vuitton show, along with Bar Refaeli and Alessandra Ambrosio. Trendsetting Miuccia Prada used Ambrosio, Isabeli Fontana, Doutzen Kroes and Miranda Kerr — all best known as voluptuous Victoria's Secret models and all in their mid-20s, a relatively advanced age for runway models.

It's a smart move by the fashion industry to make itself more relatable to consumers. Costa acknowledges that the tough retail climate has helped force design houses to speak more directly to their customers.

"The woman who puts my clothes on needs a certain level of sophistication," says Costa. "We wanted to acknowledge women who have always worn our clothes, women with their own identities, have full lives, have kids." It also may help counter perennial complaints about

skinny models. It's said that age brings wisdom; it also usually brings curves.

The more mature look was on-trend with the chic, retro styles shown for fall, so helping models' health may be icing on the maybe-not-entirely-fat-free cake.

Still, Nian Fish, creative director at fashion-show powerhouse producer KCD, says designers, stylists, casting agents and modeling agents all collectively heeded the call to put forth a healthier image.

"This is fashion coupled with compassion," says Fish, who helped the Council of Fashion Designers of America launch its health initiative back in 2007. "But I think the compassion came first, and then the fashion suited these bodies. I loved seeing these bodies in Prada. We're always looking for trends at Prada, and seeing Victoria's Secret girls on the Prada runway woke up a lot of people about what a woman should look like." Older models have had far more success in print, where 41-year-old Christy Turlington and 39-year-old Claudia Schiffer, for example, still star in top-tier campaigns. But while ads have always been specifically crafted to sell something, the runway had been about fantasy.

The reaction to Costa's more womanly look — a shift from the house's usual almost androgynous muse — has been very positive, he notes. "You can see a Kristen McMenamy wearing the clothes. You can see a woman who's so cool, but her hair is so real — it's amazing," he says.

"These runways looked great," agrees Fish. "Our eyes adjusted very quickly because we wanted it to. Everything looked fresh and new. Seeing clothes on post-pubescent bodies didn't look fresh." The current controversy about models' weight actually goes



Oldie but goodie Elle Macpherson.
PHOTO: AFP



Australian Miranda Kerr takes to the catwalk at the David Jones Autumn Winter 2010 fashion show.
PHOTO: AFP

back to the early 1990s and the days of Kate Moss, her waif body and a look dubbed "heroin chic." But the conversation turned to age at a panel discussion earlier this year where Kroes, 25, and Coco Rocha, all of 21, both said they weren't getting much runway work because of their age and curvier figures.

"I had been away from fashion shows seven or eight years, other than Victoria's Secret," says Ambrosio, who also walked for Giles Deacon. "It was really nice to participate. It was surprising because, for such a long time, designers were only using girls that weren't so sexy, whose bodies were less curvy." It was a coup for her to be cast, she says, but it also

helped score public interest in the shows.

"People were interested in the known faces on the runway," she says. "We've all been working for such a long time, and the more you walk, the more you work, the more confidence you have. You can relax, smile more, add personality. You walk the way the clothes need to be shown." Ed Razek, president of Victoria's Secret, is amused that the fashion world is rediscovering boldface models, who, naturally, have to have a few years under her belt to become famous.

The first time he met Chanel Iman, she was already considered an It Girl in the fashion world, starting on the runways at 15. But she was too scrawny and young, Razek recalls. Now at age 20 she has a lucrative Victoria's Secret contract.

"She promised in the next year, she'd grow curves — and she did," Razek says.

This season, girls of 13 or 14 were told this season to come back when they were a bit older, says KCD's Fish. And other models who looked unhealthy were advised to take the season off but with an open pledge to embrace them when they return after getting treatment.

The CFDA's voluntary wellness guidelines link age and health, even if they don't set specific standards, says Steven Kolb, the organization's executive director. There are standing recommendations that models under 16 not be hired and those under 18 not work past midnight and have supervision, rest and regular meals.

"The age and thinness thing go hand-in-hand," Kolb says. Fish says she hopes the younger girls do come back — with many more years of work in front of them.

"This is all going to snowball now. Once these few key designers do this, it snowballs and it makes it OK for everyone else to do." Will McMenamy and her gray hair be back, too? Costa won't commit, saying he does embrace newness. But, he adds, that doesn't have to be synonymous with youth.

"Kate Moss has grown up," he says. "Now she's the woman I wish to wear my clothes."



Miranda Kerr (left) and Alessandra Ambrosio (far right), both in their mid-20s, appeared on Miuccia Prada's catwalk.
PHOTO: REUTERS

Milan expo showcases eco-friendly, affordable furniture

The global economic crisis has seen a shift in consumer preference to furniture with value that matches its price tag

AFP, MILAN

Eco-friendly, more affordable furniture took center stage at the Milan International Furniture Fair as designers sought to woo green-minded consumers with smaller budgets in tough economic times.

Wood and metal were the materials of choice, and echoes of nature abounded, such as Vappellini's tulip-shaped chairs and chairs by Sici's evoking four-leafed clovers.

"There is a desire for rustic things, for the countryside," said Evelina Bazzo, head of communications for Italian company De Castelli. "This can't be explained rationally, but it is the taste of the moment. This would not have worked 15 years ago."

The trend has given De Castelli a window for their wrought-iron furniture with many pieces that double as planters. Its sales grew by 27 percent last year, even as the Italian furniture sector as a whole saw sales decline by 18.2 percent.

Designers like German Michael Koenig of Picto have broken down the barriers between



indoors and out. His metal sculptures shaped like trees for the living room offer a way to "commune with nature without having plants," Koenig said.

Eco-friendly furniture is "the only way forward," said Jukka Lommi, designer for Finnish company Punkalive. "That's the future."

Punkalive's furniture is labeled with the amount of carbon dioxide emitted during production and their headquarters are heated with wood shavings from their production.



PHOTOS: AFP



Prominent French designer Philippe Starck, a leading light in the New Design school, went so far as to say that "design is useless. There are already millions of chairs to sit our cute butts on."

"Ecology, that's where we can still express ourselves," he said.

A trends analyst for the expo, Marco Romanelli, said people were looking for "a welcoming interior as a refuge" from the outside world, which was evident in rugs and

designs using wide-mesh fabrics.

The six-day Milan expo ending Monday also showcased fashion powerhouses Armani, Missoni, Versace and Bottega Veneta proposing signature luxury interiors.

The global economic crisis however has led most consumers to prefer more affordable, practical and durable furniture.

"Some things, strangely, have disappeared. Everyone's grandmother had a dresser, and its usefulness is obvious, but it's hard to find them even at flea markets," said Starck, who designed one for Italian company Kartell.

"Two years ago, many people were still buying fun, fanciful things, but now people want something more practical and durable," said Marco Serralunga, head of the eponymous Italian company.

"Consumers have learned a great lesson from the crisis," Romanelli said.

"They are much more careful and they want things whose value matches the price tag. It's a very positive effect of the crisis that objects have become smaller and less out-of-reach."