

## THE FUTURE OF FASHION

Has the runway reached a fork in the road?

On one path is Jared Gold, who will showcase his fall collection on trains. Others are staying on the tried-and-true catwalk. But both sides see engaging the consumer more directly as key.



**ON TRACK:** Jared Gold bows at last year's show at Union Station. "[Traditional] runway shows are not lucrative," he says. (Jiro Schneider)

By Adam Tschorn

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Sometime in early November, on an Amtrak Coast Starlight train hurtling north from Los Angeles to Seattle, the aisles between the seats will spontaneously become a fashion runway. They will showcase designer Jared Gold's fall 2009 Armada collection for on-board fans and customers -- who may also find themselves treated to impromptu musical performances -- as part of a seven-city fashion tour of the American West that will include open-to-the-public, virally marketed runway shows set in train stations and full-blown pop-up boutiques.

Gold's mash-up of 21st century social networking and 19th century transportation may sound like nothing more than a steampunk seamstress' dream come true, but it solves many -- if not all -- of the problems now plaguing a runway presentation format that's remained virtually unchanged since New York began staging fashion shows more than half a century ago: a handful of fashion reporters and retail buyers gather knee to knee in venues around Manhattan to preview clothes that may (or may not) appear in stores six months hence. "[Traditional] runway shows are not lucrative," said Gold, whose tour chugs out of L.A.'s Union Station on Nov. 3, hits the Seattle runway Nov. 7 and wraps up in Las Vegas a month later. "You get press, but there's absolutely no proven metrics that show press translates into sales of your garments. So I decided I was going to do shows where the people who are actually buying my clothes are invited, and they can come and buy it right there."

The result? "Basically, in one hour, I have die-hard fans that will spend the rest of their lives buying my brand," Gold said.

Although others in the fashion community can (and do) disagree with Gold's blanket assessment that there is no measurable benefit to the familiar runway format, he's far from the only one taking a long hard look at the catwalk. In July, the Council of Fashion Designers of America held a forum in New York City. Participants -- including industry movers and shakers such as designers Diane von Furstenberg (who also serves as the council's president), Donna Karan, Betsey Johnson, Proenza Schouler's Lazaro Hernandez and Jack McCollough, and Vogue editor Anna Wintour -- debated the relevance of runways.

Thanks to the meteor strike of the recession and changing consumer habits, the idea of shelling out between \$200,000 and \$300,000 (a price tag that includes not only venue rental but hiring models, stylists and makeup artists; creating invitations and preparing scenery and soundtracks) to stage a show in New York City's Bryant Park during Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week for what's essentially free publicity for clothes no one can buy for months (the shows are not open to the public, and buyers often see the collections during showroom appointments) has been under increasing scrutiny. The price can be even steeper to show in Milan or Paris, fashion capitals that face the same challenges.

"The world has changed and we haven't," said Johnson, who has held at least two runway shows a year for the last 45 years. "There's a lag time now, and what designers are shipping is very far from the 'buy now, wear now' concept, and it doesn't match the way people are shopping."

Traditionally, designers have turned to sponsors to help defray the costs of mounting a show. (It was recently announced that MAC cosmetics is footing the bill for a handful of up-and-coming designers to show at Milk Studios during New York Fashion Week.) But Johnson says the recession has made such sponsorships harder to come by. And even if the models hit the catwalk looking like logo-emblazoned NASCAR drivers -- or wearing dresses made from Starbucks bags -- there's more to the equation.

When asked to gaze into the crystal ball and describe the runway of the future, some experts point to the disconnect between when the clothes appear on the runway and when they hit retail, and they said the need to more directly involve the consumer is crucial.

"My suggestion [at the fashion designers meeting] was -- I did a show in Rio like this once -- show a clump of 'now' and a clump of 'later,'" Johnson said. "The press needs to work months ahead and manufacturers need to show the collection to buyers early on to get some rough idea that the fabrics are correct, but I think the consumer understands that."

Steven Kolb, executive director of the fashion designers council, agrees. "I think you'll start to see hybrid shows where you have a designer showing clothes that are currently in season and in stores and can be bought now, along with a preview of the upcoming season -- or maybe there will be five days of business followed by a weekend of shows that are open to the public. In the future I think there will be more of a focus on what consumers can buy now."

Including the customer is not a novel idea. In 2007, IMG Worldwide, which produces Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week, tried its hand at a few short-lived, consumer-oriented runway events in cities such as Houston and San Francisco, but they weren't a success. Still, Fern Mallis, senior vice president of IMG Fashion, isn't opposed to looking at the idea again.

"I've got a drawer full of proposals about that idea," Mallis said. "I think it's worth revisiting at some point." She noted that the already planned (and unrelated) shift from Bryant Park tents to Damrosch Park at Lincoln Center in September 2010 will make including the public easier. "That's a place that's set up for the purpose of selling tickets to consumers for events," Mallis pointed out.

But other than that, she thinks the runway of the future won't look appreciably different. "I think it's going to look close to the same. The best way to see clothing that women want to buy and wear is to see it worn by a beautiful woman, with lots of people oohing and aahing about it. Will there be changes in technology like hand-held PDAs that will let you zap the looks you like and then you get them burned onto a disc at the end? Probably. The backdrop visuals, the runways themselves and who is in the audience may change, but the essence of the runway format will be the same."

Way at the other end of the spectrum is Gold, whose current line of retro-fun-house frocks draws

inspiration from such diverse elements as Ukrainian dyed eggs, '60s mod street fashion and Pierre Cardin. Gold describes his embrace of fashion as "a little less like fashion week and a little bit more like the [Vans] Warped Tour for girls."

Using viral marketing databases and social networking sites, Gold plans to cast his runway models, hair and makeup stylists from local talent in each city. Tickets, which are free to the public, can be reserved online (which allows him to compile even more demographic information). After each event, customers can shop for the same clothes they've just seen.

"We did a couple of beta test shows," Gold said. "And when we did one at Union Station [in L.A.], I don't know what the total merchandise sales were, but I remember within 56 minutes we'd sold \$10,000 [worth]."

And that's the thing that will no doubt make the rest of the fashion world sit up and take notice. Instead of spending the \$150,000 minimum he estimates it would cost to hold a single show in Bryant Park, Gold is going to have half a dozen shows spread across the American West that won't rely on the media or retail buyers to reach the customer directly.

The best part?

"Thanks to my sponsors -- including Amtrak -- and the retail component, I'm going to actually end up making a little money."

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