

A story in search of a fitting ending

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Cinderella came to Milan yesterday, just in time to to the ball.

Actually, that's a bit of an exaggeration. In truth Gwyn-eth Paltrow came to Milan yesterday just in time to celebrate the launch of a short film she made with Dennis Hopper for Tod's at a dinner thrown by Diego Della Valle, chairman of the company. Paltrow is the official face of the brand, and the film, which will be shown on Tod's new WebTV starting today, is a very clever proprietary marketing vehicle (it tells the story of a beautiful girl who loses not her glass slipper but her squashy, zipper-bedecked Tod's Pashmy bag). In any case, aside from an appearance by Gate Blanchett and family at Armani, and promises that Jennifer Lopez, Marc Anthony and Matthew McConaughey will show up at Dolce & Gabbana later today, it's been a pretty movie-star-free-season thus far, and the Paltrow appearance created a palpable rush.

It was about time. Milan is finally starting to wake up from its hitherto somnolent state and craft its own fairy tale; to be proactive instead of just reactive. Consider, for example, these words from Miuccia Prada: "I wanted to go back to primitive things, to the things that matter to women: besides lace [the theme of her last collection] there is what? Gold, bras, and pants."

But isn't that just another way of saying ... "Sex? Yes."

So there were bra tops and Gina Lollabridgida pencil skirts, cropped trapeze jackets attached to ban-deaus, and skirts cut away on the side to show the big pants underneath. There were I sleeveless sheath dresses with transparent panels down the side, and mini drawstring aprons tied atop bottoms like bustles. There were fish prints and snake-skin and pixels and black, white and gold, and all of it came in a silk or cotton mixed with metal to hold its shape, which was then crumpled by hand for an intellectual brand of touch-me-tactility. In hard times - and Prada just cancelled plans for an initial public offering (again) - a girl uses what she's got.

They were not the only ones to figure this out. At Jil Sander, Raf Simons also produced his sexiest collection yet, scattering his signature tailoring with peekaboo fringing and look-here openwork seams. Elegant work-a-day jersey jackets over neat Bermuda shorts would turn to reveal the surprise of draped cowls or skin-skimming fronds, a mini-sheath would be veiled by ankle-length strings (a cool coatdress heated up by the same), and various buttoned-up styles virtually unbuttoned via the movement of a cutaway seam at the side, or a panel that turned out to have a mind, and movement, of its own. The idea, said Simons, was to explore "the pleasure of the unknown; the reward of leaving familiar ground and responding to new impulses."

For a house hitherto marked by its insistent austerity, the slicing and dicing and show-and-tell was a radical yet controlled change, a way of demanding attention without sacrificing smarts. Jil Sander changed hands this summer, the previous private equity owners Change Capital selling it to Onward Holdings. Takeshi Hirouchi, Onward's chairman and chief executive, sitting in the front row, beamed like a fairy godmother and said: "We see this as a new start for the brand".

Not every bid for attention, however, was so clear. At Ferrag-amo, for example, designer Christina Ortiz, now in her second season, appears to be trying to craft a new identity for the house that Hollywood wedges built, but how the super-wide-legged trousers, asymmetric tops with bloomers, and kimonos-on-steroids tops were supposed to seduce anyone (other than a skinny model trying to fool people by adding pounds) it was hard to tell.

Things were a bit better at Etro, as Veronica Etro stuck to her family's signature prints, this time with a vague whiff of the orient, mixing it all up in chiffon scarf dresses here, relaxed jumpsuits there, and transforming men's pyjamas into trouser suits for the ultimate in comfort work wear, but a segue into metallic sports wear went off-piste.

In past seasons such choice (or confusion, depending on what you want to call it) might not have mattered, but in the present super-competitive market, when product outweighs capital, the issue becomes how do you get the Prince(ss) to choose you instead of the next brand?

As Prada and Sander showed, you've got to work it, baby, not unlike Ms Paltrow, with her much-ballyhooed hard-bodied Eyes wide open: complexity appearance in ultra-minis and vertiginous stilettos at Iron Man premieres everywhere last summer.

Which brings up the conundrum that is Bottega Veneta. Bottega has made its name on the sort of ultra-discrete, unidentifiable super-luxury characterised by blurred colours, fantastic internal workmanship, and quasi-frumpy silhouettes that enforce a situation where to love them, you really have to know them (the implication being that not to know them is to be... uncultured). This season was no different, as butter-soft leather pinafores, purposefully naive full-skirted, puff-sleeved shirt dresses in "tea", "ash", "saffron" and "copper", and baby doll silk organza sheaths with curving high waists and bouncing bubble skirts walked the runway.

"In terms of design, it's one of the most complex and difficult collections we've done," said designer Tomas Maier, which translates as it took a lot of work and will cost a lot of money, yet the amount of energy required to appreciate such pieces keeps rising, which makes one wonder: if a dress needs to be felt up to be understood, is it worth the effort?

Put another way, if Prince Charming has to be taught how to kiss the girl, will we still have our happy ending?

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