

Sensuality revitalizes sportswear

Diversity brings new dimension

Sweaters cut away to reveal bared flesh, coats swinging sleeveless over rangy bodies or leggings running down to cover ankle and foot — traditional American sportswear is being challenged at the start of New York Fashion Week for winter 2010.

This spring “American Women: Fashioning a National Identity” is the title of the gala exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. And the subject

age and its future.

JASON WU tried the same fashion maneuver from a different standpoint but failed to pull it off. He started from an uptown aesthetic — correct clothes given a dash of daring when a splatter of ink pattern hit the hem of a tailored coat or the surface of a slim dress was gilded. The tailored pieces had the right kooky originality, like a wide mannish jacket and pants. But when Mr. Wu showed full-skirted prom dresses or a crinoline front swaying like a pregnant stomach, his technique was not up to his vision.

Ralph Rucci’s skills are so immaculate that his work, all done in his own studio workshop, reaches couture level. Not for the first time at **CHADO RALPH RUCCI**, the most rarefied effects let light in on skin, with lacy inserts or tiny open-work panels. They created upscale outfits for a tony audience that had been asked to dress in evening wear.

Yet it was not the outfits opening windows on the body that made the collection seem powerful and fresh. It was the daywear: leather jackets and fur suits, shown with modern over-the-knee boots, while cords, wafting with feathers, were wrapped round the hands as another example of Mr. Rucci’s delicacy and refinement.

PETER SOM looked as if he wanted to have fun with his collection. Using a Bohemian mix of fabric and pattern, he showed long skirts in bright and shiny prints. Pull-on hats and dark lips gave just a hint of the 1970s to an easy mix of knitted, fur and silken pieces. The collection was more of a romance than a revolution, but it had an upbeat spirit.

LACOSTE could claim to be the founder of sportswear fashion, when the polo shirt with its signature crocodile came off the tennis court and into men’s closets. The designer Christophe Lemaire carries on the tradition by showing men and women together on the runway. The show started with striking egg-shaped outerwear, the rounded coats and knits bringing a whiff of Claude Montana in the 1980s. But as the show evolved into hot, strong color, Lacoste seemed to be trying too hard to be a “fashion” brand.

At **PREEN**, the English design duo also showed egg-shaped coats that are a growing trend. But this show was mostly about built-in underwear, with visible bras giving a feminine vibe to tough and streamlined chic. **SUZY MENKES**



CHADO RALPH RUCCI

could not be more timely because the archetypal American style is in flux.

The cultural diversity of a new generation of designers has widened the parameters. Or, as Humberto Leon put it Saturday as he baptized a second, Midtown version of his cult Opening Ceremony store here: “American style has broadened a bit, and designers like **ALEXANDER WANG** are challenging the vision of the mass market.”

The sexually potent show sent out by Mr. Wang — all cut-away tailoring and caressing velvet — was the perfect illustration of turning sportswear inside out. The designer has an insouciant way of switching between a luxurious and a gritty aesthetic. A camel coat, clerical and sober, was revved up by removing the sleeves and teaming it with leggings and Bermuda shorts. A pinstripe jacket crisscrossed the breasts and was then chopped off to expose flesh, while a traditional tail coat gave a cheeky hemline to a brief skirt.

Even the accessories were stylishly skewered, as thick wool socks climbed thigh high and backpacks came in luxurious velvet.

The designer brings a compelling energy to clothes that have one platform-soled boot planted in traditional sportswear and the other in layered street style, making Mr. Wang a rare designer straddling the American herit-



ALEXANDER WANG



PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRIS MOORE/KARL PROUSE

Reed Krakoff of Coach is designing a line of women’s wear.

Straight from the heart

“It’s a very interesting time to re-embrace American design — that ability to take something casual, industrial and utilitarian and elevate it,” says Reed Krakoff, standing in front of the inspirational “mood board” for his first ever fashion show.

For 14 years Mr. Krakoff has been feeding what he calls “a machine” or a “design puzzle.” That began when Lew Frankfort, chief executive of the Coach leather goods company, persuaded him to join the business. Together, they have built the company, which in 2009 exceeded \$3.2 billion in annual sales.

Mr. Krakoff’s new fashion venture with its discreet logo (“no over-branding,” says the designer) is being developed independently by Coach as a range of women’s wear. And for the designer, it is his first chance to work with his heart rather than his head.

His inspirations are modernist design, like the invitation for a “Machine Art” museum exhibition with a ball bearing as decoration — an idea that was translated to industrial zippers and fasteners for the clothes. Or the artist Joseph Beuys’s felt clothing, interpreted as a melton wool coat.

Drawing on his personal collection of modern designers, like Ron Arad, Richard Meier and Hella Jongerius, Mr. Krakoff is putting a lot of himself into the collection. That includes his memories of growing up in Connecticut in the 1970s, where although his mother may have worn Pucci dresses and Gucci patent leather loafers, his father always wore tailored clothing in the Brooks Brothers mold.

“There was a real honesty to the clothing,” says the designer, who sees “the coat as a centerpiece.” He aims to bring the rigor of utilitarian clothes, with a hint of the military in the sculpting of a blue-gray suede coat, a pea jacket or an articulated sleeve.

“But it is full of juxtapositions — interplay tells the story,” says Mr. Krakoff, referring to a blouse with a ruffle flowing from a sculpted top or luxe materials from napa leather to a silk organza that brings out a “more sensual side.”

Reaching back to early American style, Mr. Krakoff turned to the designers Bonnie Cashin and Claire McCardell. But the big influence of a modern working woman comes from Delphine, his French wife and the mother of his three younger children.

You would not expect a king of bags to ignore accessories. They, like the clothes, balance the feminine and the industrial: purses hammered with nailheads; others gleaming in green pony skin or in luxurious raw materials from gazelle through python to shark.

How different is this new role for Mr. Krakoff? His early fashion experience, after training at Parsons School of Design, was with Anne Klein, as assistant to Narciso Rodriguez, and then with Ralph Lauren and Tommy Hilfinger, before he joined Coach in 1996.

“My own aesthetic is very different from what I have done in the past — with Coach I have quite a distance from it in a personal way,” Mr. Krakoff says. “It is really tough to create something from nothing.” But, he added, he has enjoyed the work so much, “I don’t have to filter what I feel in my heart.” **SUZY MENKES**



DOO-RI

Asia’s gift

A striking installation at the New York Public Library last weekend showed the work of Korean designers. Hosted by the Korean Cultural Ministry, the Council of Fashion Designers of America and **DOO-RI** Chung, the event also underscored the importance of Asian creators to American diversity.

Ms. Chung, based in New York and known as Doo-Ri, gave a strong show based on her ability to drape jersey, a skill learned from working with the late Geoffrey Beene. Mixing tailoring and fluidity in one outfit, the designer brought a fresh vibe to the masculine/feminine look.

“When I am in Korea, I feel very American, and in America, I feel Korean,” said the designer. “It is the duality of being born in America and growing up with those ideals — but with Korean cultural references.”

The biography of **PRABAL GURUNG** reads like a global fashion tour. Born in Singapore, raised in Katmandu, Nepal, apprenticed to Manish Arora in New Delhi and then an intern in London, he began his solo career in New York, where he ultimately became the design director of Bill Blass. Something of that bold American style showed up in Mr. Gurung’s use of dashing black and red. **SUZY MENKES**



PRABAL GURUNG



JASON WU



PETER SOM



LACOSTE



PREEN

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