

TRAIL BLAZERS

iQ speaks to the dynamic design partnership behind Les Hommes, the international menswear label making a serious impact in the world of men's fashion

It's their first visit to Dubai and the Belgian team behind Les Hommes – designers Tom Notte and Bart Vandebosch – have impressively found their way to two of the city's most recently opened attractions within a mere 24 hours: "The aquarium at the Dubai Mall is very impressive and Nobu is beautiful, much better than Nobu in Milan." Says Bart. And – having shown in Milan for the previous four seasons – these guys should definitely know.

Since its launch four years ago, Les Hommes has met with critical acclaim. Already stocked in more than 100 high-end stores and boutiques across the world (in the UAE the label is available exclusively in Saks Fifth Avenue) and with plans in place to open a stand-alone store soon, the hard work has obviously been worth it.

Both graduated from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp, Belgium, and clicked instantly. "As soon as we met we knew we wanted to work together, though our paths into fashion were very different. I studied economic science for two years and then graphic design for two more before moving into fashion design," says Tom.

The leap from economics to fashion may seem great, but, as Tom is quick to point out, his skills in economics have undoubtedly been one of the reasons for Les Hommes meteoric rise to success. Bart's route into fashion design was more organic, his parents owned an art gallery and he went to an art college, always knowing that fashion was on his career agenda.



Bart Vandebosch
and Tom Notte

After working for Olivier Theyskens (the artistic director at Nina Ricci) for three months, Tom chose to work for a commercial brand to pick up company experience. Shortly after Bart's graduation they decided to combine forces and Les Hommes was formed.

"We were working together in the first year at the academy and we started to think about putting together a small collection," says Tom. "We didn't know what we were going to do and we had no idea about the logistics involved in setting up a fashion label, but we knew there was definitely room in the market for a range of clothing with a design aesthetic such as ours." Bart continues: "We started with just the two of us – no staff, nothing – in our apartment. Our parents gave us a computer and we bought a fax machine, which we were very excited about at the time. We handled every aspect of the business, literally everything: designing, making phone calls, sales, accounts, dealing with production, marketing – even driving the delivery van. It was really hard work, but we gained experience in every area of the business and we think that this is definitely one of our strengths. Many designers don't have first hand experience of these things and I think to run a successful business you need to be aware of every cog in the machine."

For most people the idea of living and working together with one other person in such close proximity isn't a prospect to relish, but for Tom and Bart their closeness is the key ingredient to the label.

"We fight a lot, but that's cool – it's a creative process," says Tom. "We even design sitting next to each other on one piece of paper with two hands correcting and adding to the design, until gradually we have a fully formed concept that we're both happy with. It probably doesn't work for many, but this is how we've always done it, sometimes the best inspiration comes from just sitting around in the pub together."

"Of course, we take a different approach when we create. I take a more architectural approach when designing and – considering my background – I evaluate the economic reality of the designs, the selling capacity, etc. Bart is more poetic and organic, thinking in terms of form and shape, you know, opposites attract. But you often can't evaluate or predict how well something is going to sell."

Bart interrupts him, saying "Sometimes pieces you think will sell don't and others that you think aren't commercial will sellout. This is where Tom and I often disagree. I don't think you can predict buying patterns so easily." (The discussion gets slightly heated now – iQ can see evidence of the in-fighting mentioned in our earlier conversation).

Describing their collections as "modern nostalgic", Tom and Bart explain that their design aesthetic looks to the past for inspiration and then updates it in a contemporary way creating a luxe, vintage feel that is at the same time wearable. Tom believes that it's this design signature – during the current economic crisis – that

'Karl Lagerfeld is a big fan of our jackets'

will see consumers remaining loyal to the Les Hommes brand. "I think it's a time for decisions and to be aware of what you're doing. You have to be different, you have to be good and you need to convince consumers that you have the right product for them. I'm an eternal optimist and I'm confident that we'll have a firm customer base throughout the credit crunch."

The fact that the brand also has a huge celebrity following will obviously be useful – the label is regularly used to kit out singers



Les Hommes Spring/
Summer 2009
collection

Karl Lagerfeld



in music videos and is a popular red carpet choice; even Gwen Stefani regularly buys blazers and suits from the men's collection.

"It's great to have the respect of the fashion industry. We've had lots of support from fashion media (Les Hommes have been featured in fashion bibles *LUomo Vogue*, *I-D* and are championed by *International Herald and Tribune* Fashion Editor Suzy 'Samurai' Menkes) and from other designers. Karl Lagerfeld is a big fan our jackets. In fact, he wore one of our jackets to the Chanel cruise show recently. Karl is amazing, he's in his seventies and he's still so influential, he's an icon. If you get the respect from the likes of him and other industry leaders, who've been in the business for decades, then it's a really nice feeling, you know you're doing something right."

Both Tom and Bart are huge admirers of Dolce&Gabbana and the comparisons between both design duos are obvious: both have started from grassroots, both have a close working relationship and both are (or were, in the case of Dolce&Gabbana) life partners as well as business partners. And, as with Dolce&Gabbana, the Les Hommes brand looks set to expand into diffusion labels, accessories and other items. And, with the recent surge in collaborations between designers and high street brands – Stella for Adidas, McQueen for Puma and, most recently, Comme des Garçons for H&M – Tom and Bart certainly won't rule out the possibility of doing something similar. "It's something to think about, definitely," says Bart. "We want to remain independent, we don't want to be part of a fashion conglomerate. We both like the freedom to make our own decisions. It's not easy being responsible for everything, but you never know what the future may bring."

Gwen Stefani



Bart and Tom on the catwalk

The Les Hommes duo on their favourite pieces from the spring/summer 09 collection



▲ "The silhouette of this blazer is architectural, which we've added interest to with opposing seams. We've reinvented the collar – it's a double collar, which is inspired by kimono folds. The construction certainly isn't traditional."



▲ "We love short suits, though we know that they haven't taken off in many cities. Here though, the climate is perfect for them."