

THE FACE

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HARD CORE

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3 Carol Christian Poell Milan Page 121

Carol Christian Poell is a man – an Austrian man based in Milan, who is fast establishing a serious reputation in a city that is serious about fashion. Arriving in Italy in 1989 with a missionary enthusiasm for traditional tailoring techniques, Poell had already spent the majority of his teenage hours working at his step-father's tailoring company. Since that time, he has dedicated himself to perfecting the art of sharp, modern suits, establishing his own label in 1994.

Poell is an austere purist and a mono-syllablist to boot. He calls his style "basic" and that's about all you're going to get out of him. His belief in quality of construction and material over tricky styling details makes him an ultra-modernist with the heart of a master-craftsman. It's all a little humourless, but rather than point to any racial stereotypes, note instead that menswear has never been the best place for messing around. Ask Poell whether his ambition is to go global superbrand or stay small and beautiful, though, and he replies simply: "Small and not beautiful." Be warned ■

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2 Olivier Theyskens

Brussels Page 120

Belgium has already produced a squad of fêted fashion designers in recent years, and it is this reservoir of talent that keeps it continually in the fashion spotlight. Whenever Van Noten and Demeulemeester look a bit shaky, for instance, in steps Van Bieendonck to sweep up the plaudits. Should Walter look wobbly, you can bank on Martin Margiela to return to top form once again and turn international fashion around single-handedly. And the Belgian talent keeps on coming. No sooner has Wim Neels been blessed by the international fashion press than there's yet another bit of Franco-Flemish linguistics to get our heads around. Welcome then, the 20-year-old Olivier Theyskens.

That Theyskens is still so young is positive proof that Belgian design has a tremendously effective youth training policy. His womenswear may be a little more baroque than other noted Belgians – he cites Gaultier, Lacroix, Mugler and Parisian couture as his inspirations and *Gone With The Wind* and “tragedic opera” as influences – but he brings the same sort of fierce intelligence and thrusting modernity to his ultra-feminine designs. And despite the obvious contrasts in approach, Theyskens does feel part of a cohesive Belgian force. “Belgian design has been strong for longer than people think; it really started as long ago as 1982. Belgian designers proposed a new mood about the here and now and about intelligence. I don't feel precise affinities with other Belgian designers, but there's something there, I'm sure.”

At the moment Theyskens is only producing one-off pieces, but a first-team, full-collection place can't be far off, just like further acclaim for Theyskens ■

3 Carol Christian Poell

Milan Page 121

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4 Ato Matsumoto

Tokyo Pages 122 – 123

If Japanese design to you means clothes that look like high-tech camping gear, or complex “creations” that are borne rather than worn, then Ato Matsumoto's come to slaps you about a bit. He and his ATO label reject what he calls the “Kimono Culture” in Japanese design – ie the tendency to swamp the human form in swathes of fabric and abstract shapes. “The idea with Kimono Culture is to hide the body,” he argues. “To hide someone's body is to hide their characters. I try to create clothes that accentuate the body.”

Ato likes – unusually in Japanese design – bodies. He likes them big, butch and male. In Japan he shows his collections on prime Western buff-cake, complaining that most Japanese models are too skinny. ATO's most recent collection is snug to a point well past indiscretion, favouring translucent fabrics such as gauze, nylon and mesh. But there is much more to him than peo-tacular fancy: his tightly-tailored suits manage to look like sportswear, and his fabric innovations put him among Japan's brightest stars ■

5 Akira Isogawa

Sydney Opposite page

Australian fashion design is some wags' definition of an oxymoron. And as the latest Australian fashion hope is a Japanese import, narrow minds will only have their prejudices confirmed.

But Akira Isogawa only started designing once he'd moved to Australia. Born in ultra-traditional Kyoto in 1964, Isogawa couldn't get on with conservative Japanese life. So 11 years ago he headed for a more free-spirited environment – to the sun-stroked coffee-house comfort of Sydney. “I see Australia as a country of liberation, freedom of choice and expression,” he enthuses.

Showing his first collection in 1991, Isogawa's fragile shapes have been underpinned by some overtly clever-clever design – ironically, a very Japanese trait. He is a confirmed deconstructionist and augments his own small collections in his Sydney store with work by the likes of Margiela and Demeulemeester. But, he says, the mild climates and personal freedom in Australia make his clothes stand out from the Belgian beige-ists giving him “a style that's very free without much definition in terms of either season or gender”. Alongside the work of other Australian talents like Poppy King and Collette Dinnigan, Isogawa's output will surely see the fashion reputation of Australia soar. Let's be honest, the only way is up ■



Tabatha wears grey
hooded top and
trousers by CAROL
CHRISTIAN POELL.
black leather high-
heeled boots by
MANOLO BLAHNIK

3 Milan