

*February 4, 2005*

## **At Fashion Week, the Sponsors are Stealing the Spotlight**

By ERIC WILSON

It is already evident to the hundreds of professionals whose careers center on the biannual New York runway shows, but perhaps not to the general public, that Fashion Week, beginning today, is no longer purely about fashion. It also includes commercial breaks. More than 150 clothing labels will be making their statements for fall on the runways over the next eight days, and so will a phalanx of nonfashion companies: Delta Air Lines, the Bermuda Department of Tourism, a children's wear magazine, a reality television program and Target Stores, whose models walking the catwalk will be dogs.

Also, there is a toilet manufacturer that will present a new model in temporary restrooms inside the tents in Bryant Park, where most shows take place. "This is a unique product that makes a bold design statement," said David Kohler, a senior executive of Kohler, the kitchen and bath fixtures company introducing the toilet, which is named the Purist Hatbox and costs \$2,890. "It's on par with anything you will see walking down the runway from the latest couture designer."

Over the last decade, an eclectic array of products and companies have pushed their way into the media spotlight that follows Olympus Fashion Week, named that because its title sponsor, the camera company, paid seven figures for the privilege.

But at the same time, there is concern that commercialism tarnishes the fashion industry as a whole, and some designers fear that the deals with sponsors, increasing each season, will come across as awkwardly as product placement in movies or as the heading on a press release announcing the Purist Hatbox: "Kohler Provides Attendees the Best Seat in the House at New York's Fashion Week."

"I'm walking by Bryant Park and all I see is a circus, with a tightrope walker and a cotton candy machine," said Bud Konheim, the chief executive of Nicole Miller, who decamped several seasons ago because he did not like the atmosphere of Fashion Week. "When you're talking about sponsors, they come with commercial obligations that have to be in your face all the time. What happened to the fashion? Where is the elegance?"

The shows in Midtown are organized by Seventh on Sixth - originally a not-for-profit division of the Council of Fashion Designers of America - which became part of the licensing company IMG in 2001. More than half the organization's estimated budget of \$4 million to \$5 million each fashion cycle comes from sponsors like W Hotels and Perrier (The New York Times is also a sponsor). "We live and breathe by that happening," said Fern Mallis, executive director of Seventh on Sixth.

With the cost of presenting a show typically \$100,000 or more, struggling designers often depend on sponsors. And one concern is that sponsors can influence the clothing presented.

An arrangement made by the designer Peter Som with the Bermuda Department of Tourism calls for him to incorporate Bermuda shorts into his collection on Feb. 10, and the designer Richard Tyler, who is receiving underwriting from Delta, will include more looks in his show today that he designed as uniforms for Delta personnel than for his own label, Richard Tyler Couture. Several designers working with Hewlett-Packard will include the computer company's products in their shows.

The line between what is fashion and what is a marketing ploy has become blurred, a number of designers acknowledged. Sponsorships are "the reality of being a young company," Mr. Som said, adding that he had already planned to show what he called "city shorts" in his fall collection, a knee-length cut that is similar to a pencil skirt, before he was approached by the Bermuda Tourism Board. Now they are called "Bermuda city shorts."

Mr. Tyler's designs, which will clothe more than 20,000 Delta employees next year, are striking, including a red waterproof taffeta dress and a man's felt coat with a banded stitch at the hem, a detail the designer carried over into an evening coat in his signature collection. But the Delta looks will not be available to the public.

"The whole idea is that this really looks like it came out of couture," Mr. Tyler said. "If you didn't see that it was for Delta, you would think it was a ready-to-wear collection. You set yourself up for criticism, but I am so confident I think the men's pieces could be in GQ."

Mr. Tyler, and he is not alone, said he thinks that the Kohler sponsorship is inoffensive because it is being presented to an audience that is curious about good design in other fields.

Corporate sponsorship of fashion shows was largely born of necessity, both on the part of individual designers and the industry as a whole. For much of the 1980's and 90's, fashion designers who made spectacular debuts on the runway were quickly driven out of business by the costs of those shows.

The introduction of sponsors, who help offset that expense with the contribution of finances and services, has been an enormous benefit to designers who might not otherwise survive in an intensely competitive business.

Designers and their patrons alike are highly sensitive to the perception that sponsorships could impugn their credibility. Hewlett-Packard, which is underwriting the collections of Proenza Schouler, Habitual and Behnaz Sarafpour, has gone to some lengths to avoid the appearance that their sponsorship is a gimmick. In addition to providing the designers Jack McCollough and Lazaro Hernandez of Proenza Schouler with \$60,000 worth of computer equipment last year, Allison Johnson, Hewlett-Packard's senior vice president for corporate marketing, spent hours with the designers to make sure they could use the computers to design fabrics and improve their business operations.

"It's not simply about having our brand and a fashion brand slapped together in an artificial way," Ms. Johnson said. "It's trying to create a much more meaningful connection."

The three fashion companies, in return, have created accessories for Hewlett-Packard that were unveiled at a party at Barneys New York on Monday, including an evening bag by Proenza Schouler for a digital camera, a laptop case by Ms. Sarafpour and an iPod case by Habitual's design team, Nicole Colovos and Michael Colovos.

In each case, the designers said that technology was an integral part of the design process and that the sponsorship had only influenced their collections in positive ways. "Our office is hooked up now," Mr. McCollough said. "They have given us so much. We hope we don't have to sell our souls to them, but so far, it's not bad."

The concern among some designers is that a darker side of corporate sponsorship has also come to light, as the competition between companies to associate themselves with the fashion industry has made for some uncomfortable alliances. The three shows sponsored by Hewlett-Packard, for example, must be staged elsewhere than Bryant Park, because the company, which also makes digital cameras, competes with Olympus.

Designers worry about sponsors ultimately stepping up their demands. Several designers said they have entertained bidding wars with offers as high as \$15,000 from hair and makeup companies to provide them with products and beauty staffs to style their shows in exchange for mentions in invitations and programs. "Hair care companies are actually buying or paying for shows, which personally I think is disgusting," said Michael Gordon, the founder of Bumble & Bumble, a hair care company whose stylists have been hired by designers for more than a decade. Mr. Gordon said his company would not become a sponsor and in effect pay a designer to hire his stylists.

"When I see large companies coming in and slinging money at designers, unfortunately it doesn't make things better," he said. "Sadly, I think it waters down the whole thing and diminishes the craft of the designer."

MAC, the cosmetics company, provides its products to as many as 160 designers each season in New York and at fashion weeks in São Paulo, Paris, London, Milan and Los Angeles, as well as to film projects and music tours, with a budget equivalent to its global advertising. John Demsey, president of the brand, said MAC, while willing to provide products to designers who ask for them, would not try to induce the designer by offering a premium.

He acknowledged that the company is facing competition from companies that will. "Generally and philosophically, we've always been about supporting talent," Mr. Demsey said. "We've never been about the sponsorship game. There will always be somebody that's happy to participate. I think people need to question why they are doing it."

For better or worse, there are cases where designers seeking sponsorships have managed to transform what was recently a recipe for financial ruin into a profit center, and still others who are mystified by the process. A rum company asked the Los Angeles designer Jeremy Scott if his models would carry a rum drink on the runway, even though the theme of his fall collection is "South Central meets Madame Butterfly." A spokeswoman for the designer said the offer was declined - but Mr. Scott would reconsider for a maker of sake.