

“Everything can be mixed following one’s own instincts. My take on fashion is all about personality.” ISABEL MARANT



Laid-back allure: A strong-shouldered jacket and skinny leg pants are hallmarks of the Isabel Marant silhouette.



PARDON MY FRENCH

With her tomboyish tailoring and comfortable cool, fashion designer Isabel Marant has become an influential force.

Written by Philippa Prentice.

Much is made of Isabel Marant’s effortless cool, though to her, *c’est la vie*. Tousled hair, minimal make-up, roll-your-own cigarettes and comfortable flats – it hardly seems a recipe for fashion-industry success. Yet in the 20 years since she

launched her eponymous label, the artfully undone Parisian has turned her enviable French insouciance into a sartorial blueprint for label loyalists and chain-store copycats alike.

The key to the 47-year-old’s allure is that although she stands among the designer elite, she champions reality over fantasy, creating pieces not for those few-and-far-between special occasions but for the day-to-day. As she explained to the UK’s *Sunday Times*, “There are so many clothes for really dressed-up situations, but for riding your bike or picking up the children from school – a real woman’s life – it’s not so easy. My fashion is about every day.”

Perfectly imperfect styling is a hallmark of that particular brand of covetable Gallic chic that says, “I’m too cool to care (yet somehow always look fabulous),” and Marant channels her own penchant for practicality, ease and the “certain carelessness” she considers quintessentially French into an understated take on ready-to-wear that has garnered followers far and wide. Step into one of her ever-growing portfolio of dedicated boutiques (located in Paris, London, New York, Madrid, Tokyo, Beirut and beyond) or visit any number of her hundreds of stockists worldwide, and you’ll encounter a laid-back, yet luxurious mix of wearable pieces, a beguiling fusion of the bohemian and androgynous that sees sales continue to climb with scant regard to our volatile economic climate. >>



Designer profile



Kate Moss



The Isabel Marant silhouette is characterised by a skinny leg balanced with a slouchier top (think a loose peasant blouse or a strong-shouldered jacket), each piece ostensibly simple, but never minimalist – the sleek line of a slim pant embellished with a criss-cross of laces; the classic shape of a basic sweater offset by an ethnic print. A casual sexiness is conveyed in the finer details: a low-slung waistband, an ultra-short hemline, sheer fabric, leather, lace. There’s a streetwise quality to her wares: a hint of rock ‘n’ roll, a little of the free spirit, the expert coupling of the masculine and feminine – and always room for your own spin. “Everything can be mixed following one’s own instincts,” she says. “My take on fashion is all about personality.”

Individuality, attitude, *je ne sais quois* – it’s a potent combination, the stuff lengthy wait lists are made of. And whether it’s her studded leather sandals or suede ankle boots – not to mention her now famous hidden-wedge high-top sneakers, which quickly gained cult status – her footwear, too, becomes hot property, gaining traction in celebrity circles (Kate Moss, Alexa Chung, Beyoncé and Kate Bosworth are among her fans) before filtering down to the street.

Born in 1967 to a German mother and a French father, the young Marant had a rebellious streak, a result she says of growing up with a “beautiful” brother. Speaking to *The Guardian*, she recalled, “I was not beautiful and I had this kind of reaction, a way of showing myself I was existing, and very early on, at the age of nine or 10, I knew what I wanted to wear.”

Equal parts turned off and drawn to fashion by her mum (a model and later Elite model agent with a soft spot for Kenzo), stepmother (always in Yves Saint Laurent, heavily made up) and nanny (who made up for what she lacked in refinement with a healthy dose of innate style), she began reimagining items from her parents’ wardrobes – a silk dressing gown reworked here, a cashmere jumper worn as a dress there – impressing her friends with her unique tomboyish vibe. (The aforementioned high-tops were conceived when she was just 11. Dying to be taller but not abiding heels, she stuffed cork inside her sneakers – and the rest is history.) By 16, she was selling her creations, which included garments crafted from traditional French red-striped cloth, looks she describes as grungy and heavily influenced by her then obsession with Vivienne Westwood.

In 1985, she enrolled at Paris design school Studio Berçot and by the end of the decade had launched a range of costume jewellery and accessories. In 1990, she turned her attention to knitwear with a label named Twen, which in 1994 became Isabel Marant and in 2000 grew to include diffusion line Étoile. “My brand has grown slowly and organically,” she says. “I took the decision to build it step by step, in order to maintain full freedom and honesty in my work.”

Honesty is indeed a cornerstone of Marant’s approach; she firmly believes we should always stay true to ourselves, so you won’t catch her “disguising” herself in elaborate evening wear or putting on airs. In an interview with *Into The Gloss*, she said, “I’m not very into hiding yourself. For me, the most beautiful girl would be a girl that feels comfortable with what she is. When somebody tries to be somebody else and looks too much to the newspaper or wants to resemble a certain girl, it will be a failure because you are not this girl.” How ironic, then, that we all want to look just like her, the paragon of pared-back Parisian sophistication in her own perfectly worn-in staples: skinny pants, sweatshirts, tees, well-cut jackets.

With achievable chic her calling card, Marant (whose long-time partner is accessories designer Jérôme Dreyfuss; the couple has a young son, Tal) remains steadfastly focused on creating clothes for women to get about in, that flatter and enhance, rather than restrict. She adores the old favourites you revisit time and again that become all the better with wear, and when designing seeks to

add to her own closet as well as those of her customers, aiming to curate the ultimate wardrobe into which you’ll never need to stare and wonder what to wear. In fact, we’d all do well to be guided by her philosophy when shopping for ourselves. “You want to look good but you don’t want to spend too much time on it,” she told *The Telegraph*. “I will always go to things that make me feel comfortable. Sometimes I can create things that are beautiful, but I say, ‘When am I going to wear that?’”

True to form, Marant’s latest catwalk collection, autumn/winter 2014, featured piece after piece you could adopt in an instant. Heavy on the army green, it displayed a masterful use of texture – touchable knits, sequins, quilting – and was notable for its inclusion of roomier-than-usual pants alongside the signature micro minis, belted jackets and ankle boots, and for the smattering of plaid, perhaps a nod to Marant’s teenage grunge phase.

A fixture at Paris Fashion Week, Marant has found a niche in the rarefied world of high fashion, but it’s not just those with front-row seats and deep pockets who are able to don her designs. Last year, she followed the lead of a growing number of fashion heavyweights and collaborated with Swedish retailer H&M on a range of clothing for women, men and teens, as well as assorted accessories. If she needed proof of her popularity, she got it: customers queued overnight at stores around the world to gain access to the capsule collection when doors opened on November 14; the range sold out in minutes and crashed the H&M website, with items later appearing on eBay at outrageously marked-up prices.

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In the wake of her H&M success, Marant has been working on extending her reach further still by way of collaborations with Heritage Paris (makers of impossibly cool bikes, skates, sneakers and more) on a limited-edition paddle ball kit, and Oliver Peoples on a range of sunglasses.

So, what’s next for Madame Marant? More of the same, no doubt. Citing her style idols as Jane Birkin, Françoise Hardy and Diana Vreeland, she told *Into The Gloss*, “When you look at iconic people, most of the time they are dressed up exactly the same way for all their life. They dress for themselves. I think the purpose is to find what’s right for you and what you feel good in.”

She talks of her customers buying the essence of Isabel Marant, and as such believes in refining and perfecting her looks, more so than reinventing herself each season. Indeed, when you have your finger this firmly on the pulse, it makes sense to keep it there.

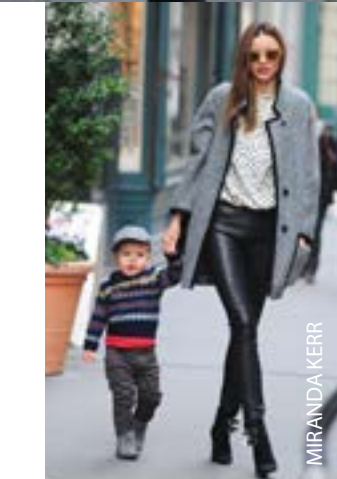
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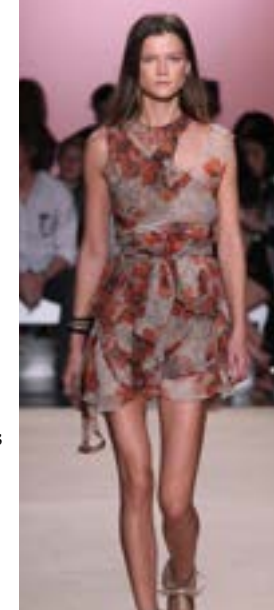
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