

Equestrian Inspiration on Top Fashion Houses

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Gucci Beginnings

Fashion giant Gucci has done it again with their Spring/Summer campaign that has everyone –including animal rights activists –talking. Horses in strange places accompanied by beautiful people in breathtaking fashions seems to be the theme of creative director Alessandro Michele’s latest masterpiece. Photographed and directed by Yorgos Lanthimos, the campaign was shot in various locations around Los Angeles including the highly gossiped Chateau Marmont hotel. These ever thin and ever gorgeous models are accompanied by their equine coworkers in parking lots, car washes, beaches and, mind bogglingly enough, inside of an airplane.[1]

[1]

Groce, N. (Jan. 2020). "Gucci's Lavish

SS20 Campaign Is Accessorized With Horses." Hypebeast. Retrieved from <https://hypebeast.com/2020/1/gucci-spring-summer-2020-collection-advertising-campaign-yorgos-lanthimos>



<https://hypebeast.com/2020/1/gucci-spring-summer-2020-collection-advertising-campaign-yorgos-lanthimos>

Horses are no stranger to Gucci. In 1921, Guccio Gucci opened a luggage and saddlery store in Florence, Italy. Gucci's main business came from making saddles and other equestrian accessories with fine Italian leather. His leatherwork became incredibly popular with English Aristocrats and he ventured into the industry of other accessories. Targeting the vacationing elite of Italy and those with equestrian passions alike, Gucci's collections of bags, trunks and saddles expanded into handbags and shoes –all carrying the equestrian inspiration in his elements and designs. Here is where we find the birth of the infamous Gucci snaffle bit motif.[2]

[2]
Silver, D. (March 2019). "Charting the Evolution of Gucci." CR Fashion Book. Retrieved from <https://www.crfashionbook.com/fashion/a26934683/evolution-gucci-designer/>



<http://fashionwithchrismelrose.blogspot.com/2012/03/mens-gucci-horse-bit-moccasin.html>

First introduced in 1953 on decorative men's moccasins, the snaffle bit motif took to popularity among many Hollywood names like John Wayne and Fred Astaire. The design was later adopted by the women's shoe line in 1968, thus becoming the signature mark of Gucci collections henceforth. 1961 birthed a whole new equestrian inspired signature mark for Gucci with its Jackie Bag. These bags are uniquely designed with a hunter green strap topped by a smaller red strap and often embellished with a gold clasp or a replication of Gucci's snaffle bit decoration. The colors of the Jackie Bag bring back reminiscent memories of the girth straps, used to keep saddles in place, of early horseracing.[3]

[3] "Gucci Equestrian Collection." (May 2013). icon-icon.com. Retrieved from <http://www.icon-icon.com/en/gucci-equestrian-collection/>



<http://fashionwithchrismelrose.blogspot.com/2012/03/mens-gucci-horse-bit-moccasin.html>

Gucci's love for equestrian attire doesn't end in the 1960's, the brand continually loves to pepper their collections with equestrian inspiration and finds every opportunity to add flair to their designs often. Former Gucci creative director, Frida Giannini, was perhaps the biggest supporter of equestrian attire in the brand. Being an equestrian herself, Giannini reached into the vault of Gucci with a 2013 capsule collection inspired by horse jumping. The pieces are innovative and made out of comfortable fabrics once again adorned by the brand's signature coat of arms, colored green-red-green stripes and the horse bit detail.[4]

Gucci is also known to have sponsored the 2009 European Show Jumping Masters in Paris, France. The fashion house opened a temporary shop with limited-edition riding boots and scarves in celebration of the event. "We are privileged in a way," says Giannini, "there aren't so many fashion houses with this connection to the equestrian world." The Gucci Paris Masters, as it was renamed, ran from 2009 to 2014 and drew crowds of up to 50,000 visitors. It was a four-day event that featured world class competitors and was recognized as the most prestigious international indoor show jumping event in the world. Gucci continues to be a partner of the Equestrian Event Management World, or EEM World.[5]

Gucci's connection with the equestrian world means more than world class show jumping events. To drive their love of horses further, the high-fashion brand regularly partners with big name riders and jumpers like Charlotte Casiraghi and Jessica Springsteen for exclusive, show-stopping designs in the arena.[6]

"Gucci was always a horsey house: That green-red-green webbing started as a girth strap," writes Vicki Woods of Vogue Magazine about Gucci's partnership with amateur jumper and Gucci equestrian ambassador Charlotte Casiraghi. Debuting in the Global Champions Tour 2010, Casiraghi wore "an exclusive equestrian wardrobe, especially designed for her by Gucci creative director Frida Giannini." [7]

Equestrian roots in fashion grow even deeper than Gucci. Many of our fashion giants have beginnings and passions deeply imbedded in horses. According to Cord Magazine, the top 10 best selling high-fashion fashion houses are: Armani, Fendi, Versace, Burberry, Ralph Lauren, Chanel, Prada, Hermes, Gucci and Louis Vuitton.[8]

With a quick search into the histories of each of these fashion houses, we find that 4 out of the 10 have origins in equestrian attire and equipment. These horsey houses" include: Burberry, Ralph Lauren, Hermes and, of course, Gucci.

Hermes had very similar beginnings to Gucci. Opening in 1837, Hermes specialized in handcrafted saddles. Finding success in their ever prestigious saddles and driving harnesses, Hermes took their leather working skills and expanded into leather accessories with inspirations coming from the saddlery. "the know-how that founder Thierry Hermes and his descendants accrued in making harnesses and saddles for the French carriage trade is invaluable and survives to this day." Says Hermes Director of Culture Heritage Menehould de Bazelaire, "The horse is a very demanding customer and Hermes owes everything we have to the wonderful animals."4

[4]

"Equestrian Heritage in Fashion."
(April 2018). Mackenzie & George. Retrieved from <https://www.mackenzieandgeorge.com/blogs/news/equestrian-heritage-in-fashion>

[5] About Us. EEM.com. Retrieved from <https://eemworld.com/>

[5] "Jessica Springsteen's Gucci Gear is Fabulous & You Can't Have it." (April 2016). Jumpnation.com. Retrieved from <https://jumpnation.com/jessica-springsteens-gucci-gear-is-fabulous-you-cant-have-it/>

[7]

Woods, V. (Aug. 2010). "Charlotte Casiraghi: Riding High." Vogue Magazine. Retrieved from <https://www.vogue.com/article/charlotte-casiraghi-riding-high>

[8] "Top

10 Best Selling Clothes Brands in the World." Cord Magazine. Retrieved from <https://cordmagazine.com/fashion/top-ten-best-selling-clothing-fashion-brands-in-the-world/>

Hermes is also a big partner for many professional and amateur riders and has its own equestrian line known as Rider that features soft, movable fabrics that are both practical and durable for equestrian sports.

Is this story starting to sound familiar? Striking parallels between the beginnings of these groundbreaking, trend-setting and insatiable fashion houses begs the question: what is this magnetic field between equestrian sports styles and high fashion houses? More importantly, what is this correlation between leather working and groundbreaking, intricate fashion designing?



Hermes "Rider" Collection

Equestrian Appeal in Apparel

Looking at the history of equestrian sport, horses have always been by man's side. Whether he was a man of royalty, nobility or of the land, he had a trusty steed that contributed to his life. "Man has always assigned a special place to the horse in the hierarchy of the animal kingdom," writes Phillippe de Montebello, former director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, "... this majestic creature has been... central to virtually all human occupations." Travelling, farm work, business ventures and even warfare have been aided in some shape or form in the presence of equine. Along with the long line of horsemanship, there has always been equestrian attire. This attire becomes more intricate the higher you climb on the socioeconomic ladder and is heavily specific to each job. "In many ways the world of the horse constitutes the epitome of social decorum..." writes Montebello, "... the cutaway and top hat, the hacking jacket and high boots, the three-piece suits and blue jeans –are considered appropriately stylish even for those who never sat upon a horse." [9]

It's easy to understand man's admiration for their equine counterparts. Historical figures like Alexander The Great, George Washington and Caesar all rode upon iconic steeds who are included in history books alongside their riders. The image of these horses are strong, powerful figures with bravery and spirit to carry these historical greats through war and success. "The horse possesses the fluid power of the perfect athlete, gleaming in regal movements," says Diana Vreeland, a former costume consultant for The Costume Institute. "The horse is the most sensitive piece of living beauty." [9]

Every great horse and rider duo require a uniform that allows for only the best performance from both –this is where the importance of fashion comes in. Riding attire requires all form to follow function. "Because of the specific functions they serve, riding costumes require above all superior design, materials and workmanship," writes Smith, Druesdow and Ryder in their narrative of *Man and the Horse*, "a harmonious blend of efficient cut, durability and meaningful decoration –the essence of true style." This is something contemporary equestrian wear has continuously adopted, and the outside world has noticed. Typically, fashions that are well made and are intricately designed are noted to be of a certain quality that is associated with higher social classes. 9

"Tailors, bootmakers, and hat makers alike know that men and women will never look good as they do in their riding gear," says Vreeland. Every detail put into the design and manufacturing of equestrian attire goes above and beyond what is expected for everyday wear. "One dresses not for display but to meet the inspiration of the ideal," writes Vreeland, "the splendid attire of the world of the horse is the fulfillment of man's half of a covenant." 9

[9] Mackay-Smith, A. & Druesdow, J., Ryder, T. "Man and the Horse: An Illustrated History of Equestrian Apparel." Metropolitan Museum of Art.



A woman with dark hair is standing, wearing a dark, double-breasted riding jacket over a white collared shirt, light-colored breeches, and dark riding boots. She is looking slightly to the right of the camera.

Explaining Equestrian Apparel

To the outside world, equestrian apparel may seem a bit odd. Tight breeches tucked over collared shirts, knee-high leather boots and strangely shaped “ties” are just a few everyday pieces we see in riding attire. The breeches are easily explained for comfort, flexibility and the avoidance of saddle rubs on the knees. Other aspects of riding apparel are less easily explained.

Jackets, for example, are only an outdated tradition from the Victorian age that mimicked the lines of military jackets worn by men during battle. Originally longer in length, the coats were shortened to the waistline for comfort and longevity of the coat itself –since the longer coats were often worn away by being rubbed against the front of the saddle. Longer coats are still used in the discipline of dressage, but with a modified front so that the flaps of the coat are free from the saddle.[10]

[10]

McGann, K. (Dec. 2011). “A History of Ladies’ Riding Jackets.” *ReconstructingHistory.com*. Retrieved from <https://reconstructinghistory.com/a-history-of-ladies-riding-jackets/>



"Bowling" hats, puffy ties and gloves are also traditions dated from the Victorian era when riding dress became more gender-neutral. The upper half of a woman's riding costume bared resemblance to that of a man's, the bottom half was adorned by a skirt made specially for riding purposes, as women were expected to ride side-saddle in an expression of femininity.[11]

The early 20th century found it acceptable for women to ride in a split skirt or breeches as the style of side saddle fell away in popularity. The Suffragettes saw the sidesaddle style as male domination and, by 1930, made riding astride the social norm for women.[12]

Recent times, however, are seeing a popularity spike once again in the style of sidesaddle. Stylereins.com calls this a "Lady Mary" effect, after the influence of the Downton Abbey franchise and the fashions and styles of Lady Mary.¹² Fashion house Dior even took notes from the "Lady Mary" effect with its 2010 collections featuring bowling hats, riding coats and the signature fox-hunting color of red. It has been said that head designer John Galliano was inspired by a photo of a young woman riding sidesaddle he found during a fitting while at the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum.[12]

[11] Matthews David, A. "Equestrian Costume."

Lovetoknow.com. Retrieved from <https://fashion-history.lovetoknow.com/clothing-types-styles/equestrian-costume>

[12] "Back in the Habit: Side Saddle Fashion

Through the Ages." Stylereins.com. Retrieved from <https://www.stylereins.com/back-in-the-habit-side-saddle-fashion-through-the-ages/>

Due to an emphasis on functionality and comfort, equestrian attire has always been made with heavy material such as wool, cotton and linen. These styles are made with durability and weather resistance in mind, so fashion-forwardness had never been a goal of equestrian attire designers. However, this did not stop them from finding the fashion lime-light. In the equestrian world, quality often matches price tag –which may be the underlying theme that attracts the fashion world. In society, members of social classes tend to strive to achieve higher status. This often times leads to the gravitation of higher-priced products on the assumption that expense is quality is high class. “For honor” is the best way sociologist Thorstein Veblen explains the phenomenon of the appeal of high price tags:[13]

“The marks of expensiveness comes to be accepted as beautiful features of the expensive articles. They are pleasing as being marks of honorific costliness, and the pleasure which they afford on this score blends with that afforded by the beautiful form and color of the object; so that we often declare than an article of apparel, for instance, is “perfectly lovely,” when pretty much all that an analysis of the aesthetic value of the article would leave ground for is the declaration that it is pecuniarily honorific.”[10]

This is what Veblen has named “Conspicuous consumption”, or the consumption of luxury goods and services with no other intent than to show ones wealth.[10]

[13] Veblen, T. (1899). “Pucinary Canon of Taste.” Chapter 6. The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions. New York. The Macmillan Company. https://brocku.ca/MeadProject/Veblen/Veblen_1899/Veblen_1899_06.html

Dior's 2010 collection was inspired by the revival of sidesaddle style.



Applying the Theories

These “honorific” price tags contribute to a popular theory in sociology known as Veblen’s Theory of the Leisure Class. In short, members of higher class society tend to become involved in “unproductive” occupations such as hunting and banking whereas those of lower class society find occupations in more “productive” industries such as tailoring or farming. The division of class also dictates what an individual does for past-time activities. Hence the term “leisure class”, the higher the social ladder, the more time you have to spend doing activities “exempt from useful employment”. The lower on the social ladder, the more time and effort is put into productivity.[10] In the “leisure class”, the more leisure time, the better. In the working class, the more time spent working, the better.

This is how we tie the leisure class and equestrians into the same social circle. Equestrian activities are considered as a “non-productive consumption of time”, and therefore a leisure. The working class, on the other hand, does not have the time or funds to be having their time consumed by such an unproductive and rather expensive past-time.

Another theory of Veblen’s that explains the separation of societal class is his “trickle-down” theory. This is the theory that new technologies and goods come at hefty price tags, making them only accessible to the wealthy and the elite. As time progresses, companies begin mimicking these designs and creating their own to sell at more affordable prices and making them more accessible to lower classes.

Georg Simmel took Veblen's theories and applied them to fashion. Simmel's version of Veblen's "trickle-down" theory explains that individuals of lower class status "emulate" the fashions of the higher classes in means to gain "upward socio-economic mobility[14]." Fashion trends are born at the top of the social and economic hierarchy and "trickle" down. Those trends then stick around in society for only as long as it takes for a new trend to hit the elite class. To Simmel, the upper class adopts new trends until they're passed down to the lower classes where they are then discarded for newer, more exciting trends. The lower class, in hopes to gain notoriety and status among the elite, continue to "recycle" these trends.[11]

In the case of equestrian wear, the attire and sport both qualify as "luxuries" to sociologists. Being affordably available only to the wealthy and elite, equestrian fashions are embedded in the upper class societies. Brands like Gucci and Hermes started their names by opening stores selling fine leather products, luggage and saddles to the elite. Their names were then branded and identified with the luxury of well-made, quality leather work. They then ventured into other markets, again selling their products to the same elite consumers. Gucci and Hermes found great success in their new marketplaces and their customers found quality luxury items in their stores. Could this be the correlation between high-fashion fashion houses and leather stores? Does the artistic expertise it takes to work with leather breed the means it takes to sell out fashion weeks?

It is abundantly clear that there is a connection between equestrian attire and high society activities. The theories of Veblen and Simmel explain the inclusion of equestrian designs and motifs in everyday fashions. Equestrian sports and their fashions of the elite are trickling down into the fashions of those who otherwise would not be involved in such past-times. With the desire to gain higher social notability with the fine artisanship, durability and elegance of equestrian apparel, there is no question why designers find inspiration in everything equestrian culture has to offer.

[14] Walmsley, D. (Dec. 2011). "Trickle-Down Theory." The Genteel. Retrieved from http://www.thegenteel.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=200:trickle-down-theory&catid=9