

Capturing the American Essence: Emily Adams Bode Aujla

I first heard about the young fashion brand *Bode* sometime in 2017, about a year after its launch, while taking summer courses in the city at the Fashion Institute of Technology. At the time, I was learning so much about the fashion industry and other designers, but *Bode* was stored in the back of my mind. Jump to 2021, where I am flipping through magazines in photography class, collecting images to use for a collage. In an instant, *Bode* caught my eye once again. The then strictly menswear designer had created looks for herself and the singer/songwriter Lorde to wear for the MET Gala. The annual event's theme that year was right up the alley of *Bode*'s designs, "In America: A Lexicon of Fashion." Although my attention was initially drawn by the general beauty of their looks, I was even more impressed after reading about them. The designer's same intuitive genius that embellished Lorde's outfit with pressed pennies like those collected on a family road trip translates to the rest of her collections.

The talent behind the self-titled brand *Bode* is 34-year-old Emily Adams Bode Aujla. *Bode Aujla* grew up in Atlanta, Georgia, with her mother, a painter and homemaker, and her father, a doctor. Despite her southern location, she was raised by the northern attitude of her parents, both from Massachusetts. The family would frequently visit the state while vacationing on Cape Cod. Along with location, her family has always been a strong influence on her aesthetic. It's a story in their family that when she was four years old, she chose her own high chair in an antique shop. This early interest in antiques and collecting was a hobby shared by multiple generations, which rubbed off on her from her mom, aunts, and grandparents.

Bode knew she wanted to go into fashion. She studied for her dual degree in menswear design and philosophy at Parsons School of Design and Eugene Lang College of Liberal Arts, and even spent a year studying abroad in Switzerland. One GQ article mentions, "Emily's abiding belief is that clothing is meant to be worn and cherished, and in college, while her peers were draping fabrics on mannequins, she was pulling all-nighters sewing clothes for her and her friends to wear to parties." While in school, she interned at both Marc Jacobs and Ralph Lauren, whose brand aesthetic Bode strongly resonated with. Despite impressive job offers following graduation, she knew she wanted her own company. This independence and authenticity are two of the keys to her success. However, these qualities also had the potential to make her stand out in uncomfortable ways. The same GQ article explains, "During her college thesis presentation, a beachy collection of trousers and knit tank tops in a room full of avant-garde fashion designs, her professor calmed down a panicky Emily with a prescient observation. Her friends had already bought her clothes. 'I was in a different kind of mindset' from everyone else, she recalls. Though she was intimidated by her peers' technical and artistic skills, her professor, she tells me, saw the contours of a thriving menswear line. 'He was like, 'You'll probably have the most successful business.' "

So many high-end designers offer a glimpse of a more luxurious world, one that their clients are desperate to know. Bode, on the other hand, offers visions of a life we feel as if we have lived before and long to return to. Bode Aujla remained true to her vision for her brand and eventually launched Bode in 2016. The then strictly menswear label was refreshingly imaginative compared to the typical solid jackets and crisp white

shirts overwhelming the market, yet her designs gained a grateful community of patrons. One article from *The Cut* focuses on “Bode boys”, the designer’s biggest fans. What is it about Bode that men resonate so strongly with? Physically, her designs are boxier and flatter a broad range of body types. As for the bodies wearing them, *The Cut* says, “Some Bode boys are conventionally handsome, but just as many are a little bit quirky looking — ‘editorial’, as fashion people like to say — and not too strenuously masculine.” The biggest conversation I ever have with a man about his clothes is either, “Thanks, my mom bought it for me,” or, “I found it at a thrift store.” Bode pieces include a little tag with the inspiration behind them. All of a sudden, guys have a great conversation starter in their shirt and a conversation continuer in the tag.

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in shopping at thrift stores among younger generations. Half the fun of second-hand shopping is how special it can make you feel when you find a good piece. Although thrift shopping doesn’t mean one of a kind, it definitely feels like it. Bode offers this same sort of pride to her customers, one that they may have never found in clothes before. But even this satisfaction is not as deep as it goes.

Perhaps the most outstanding appeal of Bode designs is that she’s pinpointed a shared American understanding and multi-generational nostalgia that resonates across demographics. The road trip pressed penny ornamentation of Lorde’s outfit is the ultimate example of this. And, though Bode’s values are not unlike those of other designers, she just does them better. American history, generations of family, the magic of New England summers— Bode and Ralph Lauren, for example, both share a love for

these. However, Bode collections exude a sense of artisanship, sentimentality, and nostalgia that Ralph Lauren tends to lack. The goal of Bode is “...to encourage people to get back into wanting to repair and alter and make clothes and appreciate them and preserve them,” the designer says. This level of thoughtfulness and preservation was certainly evident at the dawn of high fashion, but has since dwindled. Bode is bringing it back.

I remember my initial disappointment when I found out that Bode only sold menswear and that Lorde’s MET Gala look was only a special instance of Bode's womenswear. However, as of 2023, the designer has expanded her label to create her first official femme collection. Her womenswear debut took place during Paris Fashion Week, where the showcase began only after her Uncle delivered a speech about the Rice sisters. The first model to step out wore a coat and headscarf totally covered in gold sequins. The silhouette of the ensemble bore a warm resemblance to a black and white photograph of my great-grandmother, which hangs in our dining room. The metal of Bode Aujla’s choice for this collection was gold: the metal we associate with time and treasure. She seamlessly worked the fresh details we love today into vintage silhouettes. Where we would have seen nude stockings in the past, Bode Aujla styles the models in black tights. In the same flapper dress, she is conservative with the hemline, keeping it below the knee, yet the sheer sheath leaves her breasts on full display. The way she looks subtly bounced between decades while managing to remain a homogenized collection gave the same sort of effect of flipping through a scrapbook. It felt like watching one of the Rice sisters’ fashion evolve with the times, given style while maintaining her sense of self. Bode Aujla made sure that her biggest influences, her

mom and aunts, were palpable in this collection, once again confirming her values, which, according to *GQ*, include, “To think of every garment you buy as a potential heirloom.”

When I think of the kind of person who wears Bode, I come up with a messy list, but I will try to explain my vision. I picture someone living in a house with radiators rather than central heat. She sits next to the window sills with chipping paint. She has a home library, and most of her drawers hold trinkets and old journals. Scrapbooks rest on the coffee table, encouraging visitors to flip through them often. Simon and Garfunkel play softly in the background, as she cuts up newspapers and magazines for a collage. The town has cobblestone streets and an antique shop where she bought her trunk and luggage. And, of course, she wears Bode.