

## Daks Simpson: British Fashion a World Context (1894-1991)

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In 1991, the British firm of Daks Simpson, which for 20 successful years had been a trading partner of Sankyo-Seiko became part of the Japanese group. Established in 1894, as S.J. Simpson, they were one of the largest maker, retailers and exporters of quality clothing in the UK. Their speciality had always been men's tailoring, but they also made for women and were well known for sport's clothes.

The firm was unusual in making much which it sold. The flagship store Simpson, (Piccadilly) in London's centre, was notably stylish and classified as a Grade 1 national architectural monument. The factory was at Larkhall in Scotland. One of the largest, most completely automated in the world, it also hand tailored.

Wherever they are sold, Daks Simpson clothes epitomise British style. Less well known in the input from people of other nationalities and their promotion of British style overseas.

The firm was founded by Simeon Simpson one of many Eastern Europeans of Jewish origin who made such a large contribution to the ready to wear clothing industry. A very skilled tailor, he opened a small London workshop in 1895. By the 1930's it had grown into one of the best managed and up-to date clothing factory in England, making good quality suits for home and export.

The shop was founded from the profits of a new line, Daks slacks, specialized sports, trousers with a self supporting and adjustable waist band(patented in 1932) making braces unnecessary. They were so successful that Alex Simpson, the son of the founder, realised an ambition, the foundation of an ultra modern central London store. Strategically placed in Piccadilly, between Saville Row, the historic center for fine tailoring and Jermyn Street, famous for men's accessories, it was intended as a showroom for the firm and a focus of elegant life style.

The shop was designed (1934.6) in international modernist mode by the English architect Joseph Emberton, in close collaboration with Alex Simpson. It is an English design classic of the period, though many of the distinctive furniture and fittings were the work of Moholy Nage, the Hungarian born Bauhaus designer. The publicity, by the Crawford Agency, in the main the work of Ashley Havinden, an important Scottish graphic designer, aimed at the upper middle and professional classes, stressing a relaxed prosperous way of life with plenty of countrified pursuits. His tall, poised, very British male models, (whom incidentally he strongly resembled) at home in town and country, became almost a Daks trade mark. His successor Max Hoff, an emigré from Vienna, a celebrated fashion artist, continued these themes through to the 1960's.

The British way of life was a constant publicity feature. British tailoring was internationally famous and in a world recovering from trade depression, national promotions were the norm.

Although trade expansion almost halted during the 2nd World war, the shop, in a much appreciated patriotic gesture, kept up its international profile by opening a service club. In 1946 Daks Simpson launched its first export drive, to America. Natasha Kroll, the inspired design manager later a Royal Designer for industry, who had escaped from Germany before the war, toured the United States with the Managing Director, persuading shops to stock Daks Simpson goods. A high spot was the Hollywood audition for Daks type male models. As overseas demand grew, Daks(export) opened in 1950, the Canadian subsidiary in 1954 and Daks USA Ltd in 1963. A series of in store exhibitions mainly but not exclusively of British achievements maintained a high shop profile. British Fashion, 1979, transferred and was given to the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Another area developed was clothing for sports, increasingly needed as life became easier and more leisured. Daks slacks and blazers had always been popular informal wear as had the easy country-tweed suits favourites for traditional British country pastimes, hunting shooting and fishing, but now the firm began to specialize in active sports, skiing, sailing, riding and above all golf. The first designs were very British and restrained but soon changed to move varied and colourful American styles.

Sporting events with their international coverage give great promotional opportunities. During the 1950's and 60's providing outfits for British teams and others became regular practice. The Simpson family were keen sports people and Dr Leonard Simpson, who succeeded as head of the firm, an enthusiastic golfer, sponsored several International Golf championships. Daks prestige was underwritten by public appearance of the Daks yacht, the vintage Bentley and the team of champion show horses. Sports personalities attended the store and became Daks ambassadors world wide. Very effective were Gary Player, the US golfer, and Captain Mark Phillips, the show jumping champion and husband of the Princess Royal, who visited Canada on behalf of the firm.

Today there are Daks stores and concessions throughout the world. Forty in the Far East, in Japan, Korea, China, Taiwan and India where the bulk of the 500 million pound sterling sales is made and more in Europe and the UK. The Far East collections, skillfully themed, are notably varied and comprehensive more so than in the UK, and concerned with life style as much as clothes. The Daks export achievement and contribution to the quality clothing industry have been recognised by royal warrants: from HRH the Duke of Edinburgh in 1956, from HM the Queen in 1962 and HRH the Prince of Wales in 1983.

Projecting the firm across much a wide area has been facilitated by the creation of a brand image, an implied guarantee of quality, a visual statement that transcends differences of language. The Daks image is very much the creation of Johnny Mengers, later Chairman, a connection of the Hungarian branch of the Simpson family. An inspired entrepreneur, he summarized and commodified the qualities of a style developing gradually over the decades. He introduced the

house colours, the distinctive DD logo, in 1974 the registered house check fabrics, and the house style shop design in dark wood English Georgian country house idiom.

The characteristics of the Daks house style are set out in a January 1983 memo from the advertising firm Vernon Stratton employed during the late 1970's early 1980's. It was "very definitely...the English look...the 1930's look brought up to date", for Americans it was "urbane, business/social oriented". In general "The atmosphere must be social and successful, 30's and very English".

The publicity campaigns supporting this view were conspicuously successful. Updated 1930's type suiting photographed by the great international photographer Horst sold out within days. A series of luxurious themed catalogues, the clothes posed in some of the most beautiful parts of British have become collectors pieces.

Merging with Sankyo-Seiko was the final confirmation that there can be a national brand image, with international appeal. This brief history also illustrates how much one country can owe to the contributions of many others. Fashion is indeed international.