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UKFT Report

Paris Women's Fashion Week, February - March 2017 A/W 2017

Paris Fashion Week is the largest and most international of the women's market and fashion weeks. Whilst no official figures exist, there are thought to be approximately 12,000 to 15,000 buyers and press in Paris for the shows. Though there were felt to be slightly more buyers and press this season, compared with last, the move towards disparate multi-brand showrooms continues to create a situation where buyers have to spend more time on the road between the showrooms. The main tradeshows are fighting back and are increasing their level of service to buyers but the sheer number of venues and brands in Paris and the fact that it rained heavily and continually throughout the week made it more difficult than usual for buyers to see all the collections they would have liked to see.

Attendance at the previous editions had been substantially down by most accounts, but many American and Japanese buyers and press continued to return to Paris for March 2017. At Tranoi, WOMAN (in a new location at Place Vendôme) and the showrooms, the mood was generally positive. Tranoi in particular benefitted from being in two (rather than three) central venues, having sensibly jettisoned the Cité de la Mode location. However, Première Classe was quieter than at most previous editions as accessory buyers now have an overwhelming choice of products to see in the multibrand showrooms.

And not all the buyers have returned. Especially lacking were a lot of the Chinese and Russian buyers.

The Tradeshows

Première Classe and Tranoi remain the largest tradeshows during Paris Fashion Week. Tranoi is generally the main tradeshow barometer for the market. Until recently, Première Classe was the only major venue for accessories and footwear. WOMAN and Vendôme Luxury are important niche events and Capsule remains wedded to its recent colocation with Première Classe and Paris sur Mode.

Première Classe, Paris sur Mode and Capsule's new dates and location are taking a few seasons to win the hearts and minds of buyers. The shows start on Thursday, one day earlier than Tranoi and the others and they finish a day earlier on the Sunday. This is unfortunate as increasingly many of the buyers from Asia arrive in Paris at the weekend and stay for much of the following week, effectively missing much of the show. It was apparently that there were still buyers at the show on Sunday afternoon who had only just realised that the show would not be open on Monday.

WOMAN's new location in Place Vendôme was very popular with buyers and the exhibitors felt that the new luxurious location of the show fitted their collections. Meanwhile, regular exhibitors at Vendôme Luxury said that they had seen their regular customers from the Middle East in particular but there is a feeling that Paris Fashion Week is less and less about luxury and more and more about new talent. For the first time in some while, we saw a number of Russian mainstream and 'luxury' buyers returning.

One surprise this season was the addition of a new RATP Paris shuttle service between Première Classe, Tranoi Bourse and Carrousel and Place Vendôme for WOMAN and Vendôme Luxury. Such was the surprise, that most people failed to notice its existence and the service remained woefully underutilised. It will be interesting to see if the service continues next season.

The Multi-brand Showrooms

The multi-brand showrooms continue to perform well. Whilst they are not immune to the difficult trading conditions and the weather, most said that buyers stayed and bought even if it took them longer to get to the showrooms in the rain. Most of the showroom owners said that they had seen their customers with orders pretty close to their expectations. Buyers were clearly happy to spend more time at the showrooms as they believe they benefit from an edited look and the support of the showrooms who help them to select collections. This is especially important for buyers from China and Russia who often need more help. However, experienced buyers continue to like the more intimate atmosphere offered by the multi-brand showrooms and many trust the editing of the collections. Compared with the tradeshows which still charge an entrance fee, the showrooms are free of charge to all buyers.

The largest of the Paris multi-brand showrooms which are part of UKFT's #BritsinParis promotion are (in no particular order) : Polly King, Touba/The Showroom Next Door, Rainbowwave, Tomorrow Ltd, The Bridge, The Alphabet and Four Marketing. There is also a number of interesting niche showrooms representing UK brands, including: LondonSHOWrooms (organised by the British Fashion Council), D/ARK, M.Agency, SixLondon, The Collective and AQ Market. Most of these showrooms coincidentally have a UK base and all offer a variety of space-only and representation/sales packages. Most of the showrooms offer buyers and assisted visit programme and some, interestingly, will not allow buyers to walk the showroom unaccompanied. This means that not all showrooms are suitable for companies looking for 'walk-ins' and that, in most cases, appointments will need to be made in advance. For some of the showrooms, that is part of the service.

Buyer Attendance and Market Trends

Expectations for this edition of Paris Fashion Week were higher than last year. It had been expected that the US would pick up now that the US presidential elections were over. Indeed at some of the men's shows in January, business optimism was reaching all-time highs. Sadly, by the time PFW took place, the newly elected President's erratic course had already started to affect the business outlook with a number of markets and regions becoming more cautious as to what the Trump Presidency and a potential move away from Free Trade will mean for some countries, including the EU and China. At the same time, UK exhibitors remained concerned over the UK Government's course for what most see as a "Hard Brexit" from the EU; some are now seeing nervousness on the part of EU retailers to engage with new UK suppliers until the full extent of what Brexit actually means for their business is clarified.

Official figures are not released by any of the tradeshows or showrooms during PFW, but it became clear as the shows went on that most buyers were attempting to work on the basisof business as usual. There were some clear winners, especially where the products were unique and had market appeal. Buyers were buying very carefully but looking for something different. In particular this season it has become clear that many retailers have stopped trying to compete with the department stores and are reconnecting with their core consumer, buying heavily into interesting new products and strong trends and colours. This is good news for UK designers who usually have something unique and different to offer.

Of the 250 UK companies showing in Paris, over half showed with UK-based or international multi-label showrooms with the remainder at the tradeshows. The larger shows have woken up to the challenges they face from the showrooms and continue to fight back. Tranoi in particular has substantially increased its greeters at the show and for the second season was on a charm offensive to win back the right exhibitors and buyers with a more welcoming and "edited" offer for buyers who have tighter budgets and less time in Paris. Première Classe has become more available for new collections, as it has more space to offer in the tents.

On the buyers' side, buyers were buying cautiously from brands they knew already, increasingly by appointment at both the more established shows and showrooms. Newcomers need to have something especially remarkable or interesting to get buyers to commit their budgets. Again this season, we received reports of a number of larger US stores delaying payments to designers.

Korean buyers were reported as being remarkably positive but Chinese buyers were less so or, at least, they are seen to be increasingly turning their attention almost exclusively to the collections of Chinese designers – based in China (and often in the UK). China's Luxury market remains on a downward trend but the growth in the next level of the market is not currently being enjoyed by European designers as this market is often addressed by domestic designer brands. On the other hand, Japanese buyers were still very much in evidence at most of the shows, albeit in smaller group numbers and with slightly longer travel itineraries than in 2016. However, they too are thinking very carefully about pricing. With a weaker pound, UK products are comparatively cheap in Japan but it would only take a small upward trend in the exchange rate of the pound for Japanese retailers to start to feel the pinch they have started to feel in other EU countries.

Paul Alger, Director of International Business at UKFT said, "This edition of Paris Fashion Week has been very much a tale of two cities. The buyers have been here but on the one hand we have seen talented an innovative designers doing well at the showrooms in central and eastern Paris and at one or two of the larger shows. On the other, many buyers have turned their back on more established accounts, especially in accessories, looking elsewhere for something better to win back the hearts and wallets of their customer. All this serves to remind us that, in this business, you are only ever as good as your last collection".

The Brits in Paris Map and Promotion

The UKFT Brits in Paris map was originally designed to help buyers to find their way around what was, even 10 years ago, an overheating market. Again this year the map was well received and distributed at all the showrooms and trade fairs with a UK presence. A number of international buying houses have now started to request advance copies of the map to plan and support their buying trips.

UKFT’s map features over 250 UK designers. Images of the group can be found on the Facebook page.

View the Brits in Paris map and video loop.