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Berlin Fashion Week Show Report
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Whilst the term 'Berlin Fashion Week' refers to the unisex fashion catwalk events which take place in January and July each year, it is more generally applied to a series of privately-run trade events around the same time. Until a few years ago, Berlin Fashion Week was a major international event, anchored by the Bread and Butter event and Premium, attracting large numbers of Japanese and US buyers and visitors. Since the demise of Bread and Butter, Berlin remains an important date for the German, Austrian, Swiss and northern European markets, including the UK but it has lost much of its intercontinental appeal.

Much to Berlin's credit, by and large its show organisers work together to agree the dates in a collaborative way and avoid date clashes with the other two important weeks in Düsseldorf and Munich. In some cases they also facilitate each others' respective shuttle buses. Whilst Düsseldorf and Munich are almost as important in buying terms, Berlin is the event which attracts most national attention and the general consensus is that it will continue to grow and be an essential part of the national and regional men's and women's wear market.

There are four main tradeshow organiser groups and six shows, in addition to Mercedes Benz Berlin Fashion Week Catwalk who coordinate and run the catwalk shows:

Panorama

The largest of the fashion events, Panorama is very definitely a mainstream show and it is the most German feeling of the shows. Large stands, many of them German but with some interesting mainstream collections from around Europe: Joules, Apricot, Braintree, the Oxford Shirt Company, Bench and Emily and Fin were the main UK brands which were again well received here. The German brands included the heavy hitters Tom Tailor and large brands such as Weijl. In most cases the stands were manned by German agents. Halls 1-6 are generally well laid out and organised. Halls 7 and above were a little more confusing and generally had a lot less footfall. In particular, in hall 9 there were some huge brands on large stands next to smaller start ups.

Premium, Show and Order, Seek and Bright

When Bread and Butter left Berlin for Barcelona and then, after returning, disappeared again, it was Anita Tillmann and the Premium team who really kept Berlin together. Premium is an upscale men's and women's show. Some of the offer overlaps inevitably with smaller Show and Order show. Premium is home to some important UK brands: Johnstons of Elgin, French Connection, Harris Wharf, Daks and Alex Monroe were this season joined joined by a substantially enlarged Peregrine range in the Kühlhaus, made in the UK. In another part of town, the same organisers effectively run the adjoining Seek and Bright shows for urban casualwear and skatewear respectively. For the second time, the organisers promoted both Seek and Bright to the buyers, having learned from a previous lost opportunity. This worked well although Bright still feels a little unloved and rudderless compared with the very eclectic Seek. UK buyers at Seek included: Gola, Lazy Oaf, JJ Emlyn, Boxfresh, Grind, Afield, Hymn, Lyph and many others. This show works well for unisex casualwear and larger brands but is not generally as good for designer collections which would probably feel more comfortable at Premium. Whilst the show is open to new companies, it still tends to be the larger brands, often represented by German agents, who do most of the business here.

The Ethical Fashion Show and the Green Showroom

Now effectively merged into one event organised at the Old Post Station at Berlin's Ostbahnhof by FrankfurtMesse, to all intents and purposes, this is the largest and most important Ethical fashion event in the world. A combination of business and education with some larger and more established but also some smaller and very interesting niche brands. From the UK were Komodo, Here Today Here Tomorrow, Beaumont Organic, Cossac, Deborah Campbell Atelier, People Tree, In-Heels, Antiform and others. Interestingly, in this event, the smaller companies are not necessarily outperformed by the larger ones as this is one market segment where small is still beautiful. Whilst some of the companies here had German agents to support them, many did not. As this is the largest ethical show of its kind, its buyers were not strictly limited to Germany and German-speaking countries. The buyer mix was broader than most of the other show and buyers here seem to like the appeal of the new.

Selvedge Run

Relatively speaking, this is the new kid on the block and one to watch. Addressing the heritage and quality market with a great presentation and some very current brands, it suffers from Berlin's more German-focused appeal since the demise of Bread and Butter. However, it has a story which would make it easily portable away from Berlin, if required and it works very closely with the Clutch Magazine and show organiser from Japan. In some respects, it is the logical replacement for the much-famed and very popular Labels Of Common Kin section of Bread and Butter which was always the jewel in the crown. Certainly a number of buyers from Japan, the USA and the UK continue to make s pilgrimage to Selvedge Run and are avid readers of its magazine. Although fewer in number than at Seek, these buyers appeared to be very specifically focused on higher priced brands, compared with the cheaper mix of brands at Seek.

Key trends

1. Generally Berlin remains an important week for the German and German-speaking markets but it also has interest for other parts of northern Europe and the UK
2. The Ethical Fashion Fair and Selvedge Run are unique in their category and continue to attract buyers beyond Europe who are looking for great collections and stories at higher prices
3. Düsseldorf and Munich are important but there is a consensus in Germany that Berlin should be Germany's fashion capital even if most of the countries key players (buyers and agents especially) are based in the West and travel to Berlin for the show.
4. The catwalk part of BFW is unisex and does not, in spite of claims to the contrary, work in the same way or have the same attention of the big four: Paris, New York, Milan and London.
5. In spite of concerns that the German market is slowing down, attendance at all the shows was generally good. The UK and international exhibitors reported good business, mainly with existing clients but there was a feeling that some of the German independents were a lot more upbeat than they had been in the previous January and July.
6. Online continues to grow in Germany but there is still a feeling that better end independents can survive and flourish in Germany and northern Europe.
7. After the UK's Brexit decision, there was no evidence of any lack of appetite for British goods at this edition of the show. Buyers are aware that this may well change once article 50 is triggered, especially if the negotiations become unpleasant and when Brexit actually happens and the UK leaves the Single Market and Customs Union. For the time being, German retailers and agents, whilst unhappy with the gesture represented by Brexit, especially towards Germany, say they have invested too much in UK brands to walk away from them now. Most hope that common sense will prevail and that business will continue but they are monitoring this on a week by week basis. On the other hand, many German and other EU companies, like many institutions are watching and planning to see how they can take market share from British brands. Whilst there is no serious damage to our exports yet, once article 50 is triggered, most of the British companies we spoke to at the shows were very worried about the effect Brexit will have on their business. The weakness of the pound has helped to make UK goods more competitive but the UK's relationship with the EU remains a long-term concern.

Paul Alger, director of international business development for the UK Fashion & Textile Association said: "I am delighted to see that the positive start we have seen to the year in interest and orders for UK companies has continued this week in Berlin. It is very important that the UK remain an active part of this week and this market."

Many companies are now looking to plan their tradeshow participations in April and beyond. Unusually, Government (DIT) has not yet confirmed budgets beyond April.

Alger said: "We and the other industries which rely on TAP as their primarly route to market are pressing DIT very hard to confirm budgets for the Tradeshow Access Programme. As a country, and as an industry, we have an important job to do: to make sure that we are reassuring and reengaging with our number 1 export markets of Germany, Italy, France and the rest of the EU at the same time as building new markets and relationships further afield. TAP grants are a central part of this and are seen by most companies as the most important kind of Government support to business. Any further delay, or indeed any cuts in the budgets would be extremely damaging and we have requested an urgent meeting with the Minister to discuss this and other ways we can work with Government to promote exports and prosperity."

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