

Ready-to-Wear Report

Ringling In 60 Years At Utex Fashion

By Brian Dunn

MONTREAL — Montreal-based Utex Fashion Group, founded by two brothers in a bicycle shop, is celebrating its 60th anniversary this year.

The company is a designer and distributor of misses' outerwear under the Utex, Hilary Radley, Jones New York and Perry Ellis labels. It also designs and distributes men's outerwear under the Utex, Massimo Moda and Perry Ellis labels and men's suits, jackets and sportswear under the Utex, Perry Ellis and U & I names. Private label is also an important component of the company's business.

Started as Utility Textile Industries by Irving and Harry Gurberg in Victoriaville, Quebec, about 50 miles east of here, Utex's first product was the Utexans men's Western sports shirt. From there, it moved into a former biscuit factory, and in 1960, into its own 100,000-square-foot factory with 1,200 workers.

Today, the company's head office is in a 140,000-square-foot building that is mostly a warehouse, design and distribution center, with a minimal amount of production done locally. Most production comes from China, Eastern Europe and Bangladesh.

Utex began sourcing products in Japan in the early Sixties and started importing cottons and wool from Romania, Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia in the late Sixties. From there, it moved into mainland China.

In addition to its head office, Utex has a 70,000-square-foot warehouse and distribution center in Fairview, N.J., and showrooms here, as well as in Toronto, New York and Chicago.

"We work with a few factories in China where we represent such a high percentage of their business so they won't take on extra accounts for a dollar more," said David Gurberg, who became company president after the death of his father, Irving, in 1991. His sister Marian Gurberg is vice president.

"We used to supply everything, like fabric, thread and buttons," he said. "It was a logistical nightmare. Now the factories are a lot more sophisticated, and we just send technicians overseas to supervise overall quality inspection."

When David Gurberg joined the company in 1961, annual sales were \$5 million. By the end of the Seventies, they topped \$35 million. Today, they are closer to \$80 million, with half generated in the U.S.

But the company's customer base has shrunk with the bankruptcy of the Eaton's department store chain in Canada and retail consolidation in the U.S. Utex products are in stores like Saks Fifth Avenue, Bloomingdale's, Nordstrom and Lord & Taylor.

"We're also facing competition from some of our retail customers who buy on their own," Gurberg said. "They'll take 60 items of ours then order 6,000 similar items produced at the low end. That's why it's important to have a label that consumers can identify with."

Utex decided to mark its 60th anniversary with a major branding campaign that includes billboards, airport advertising and print ads.

"We've been around for 60 years, but with quotas ending, we're facing more and more competition from wholesalers and retailers, and that's why it's important to have brand recognition," Gurberg said.

In terms of fashion products, Utex faces the marketing juggernauts of companies like DKNY, Calvin Klein and Hugo Boss that put a lot of money into advertising. But the company's challenges don't end there.

"Outerwear drives our business and a lot of that is now carried by big-box stores and discount chains like TJ Maxx, Winners [in Canada] and



A shearling jacket from Hilary Radley.

Burlington Coat Factory who compete with traditional department stores who are our main customers," David Gurberg said.

Utex has responded by operating at both ends of the market. In addition to supplying Sears Canada and the Hudson's Bay Co., it sells down jackets and PVC products to Costco.

"We're apparel-driven and can focus on other areas," Gurberg said. "The word 'collection' comes to mind, as in ready-to-wear for both women and men, which we will be launching for fall 2006. Right now, we're debating which labels to use."

Despite keeping one step ahead of other competitors, Utex is facing an even bigger adversary.

"Now we are facing competition from overseas manufacturers who may even be one of our own suppliers. We will continue to find ways to bring the latest fashions out at very attractive prices. If we can't, we won't survive," Gurberg said.

Donna Karan's Dutch Treat

NEW YORK — Unlike the Dutch Village theme park in Holland, Mich., where visitors can linger at the wooden shoe factory or Pieter & the Dike, the Dutch Village that Donna Karan welcomed into her late husband's work studio Friday night was artistically minded.

A bevy of wide-eyed Dutch industrial artists and other designers buzzed around the cavernous space, admiring each other's work. Their one common link was their alma mater, the Design Academy Eindhoven, the epicenter of Dutch design today. Jurgen Bey, Hella Jongerius, Maarten Bass and twin brothers Joep and Jeroen Verhoeven helped build the village.

The only person more pleased with the outcome than Karan was the academy's chair, Li Edelkoort. Standing next to Roel van Heur's red bicycle equipped with a fire extinguisher, she said, "This is amazing. The generosity of Donna Karan to give me this space is enormous. For the last 10 years, our graduates have explored many traditions using futuristic technology to make them look familiar. We love to blend the old and the new. All these products have a great emotional and romantic quality."

All too familiar with how fine craftsmanship in ceramics, glass, wood, metalworks, embroidery and knitting is being replaced by mass production, Edelkoort's crew tries to hold on to some of those features in their work. The old-new combo was evident in Joep Verhoeven's chain-linked fence that looks like it was in bloom; Jeroen Verhoeven's curved table that appeared to have been laser

cut, and Kiki van Ejjik's hooked rug with a gigantic rose motif. The exhibition folds this evening.

Karan eyed the work like a prospective buyer, examining the handiwork with great interest and peppering the designers with questions about their techniques. The designer said she couldn't think of anything more appropriate to host in her late-husband's studio, since he started out as a furniture designer, creating sets for Broadway. On top of that, the gathering captured the spirit of Greenwich Village, which has been a harbor for artists as far back as the Twenties.

Karan credited her friend, Edelkoort, for helping to bring it all together.

"Li has been my inspiration in so many different ways — as a woman, as an artist, as a teacher. I think we talk the same language," Karan said.

Earlier in the evening, Edelkoort insisted the academy was a fine-tuned machine before she got there. "All I had to do was fly the kite," she said humbly.

One of her prodigies, Kiki van Ejjik, created a color-coded, Mondkiaan-inspired piece on the second-floor. She placed a variety of traditional Dutch foods in primary colored square frames, so that viewers would look into each as if they were a little museum.

"I think this is the best exhibit space that we have ever had. The color and the space itself is just perfect for the objects," she said.

Murray Moss, one of the first to pick up on designers such as Hella Jongerius, agreed. "The students' work is usually not shown in this type of polished environment even though it is by far the best design school in the world. It gives it the respect which I think it deserves."

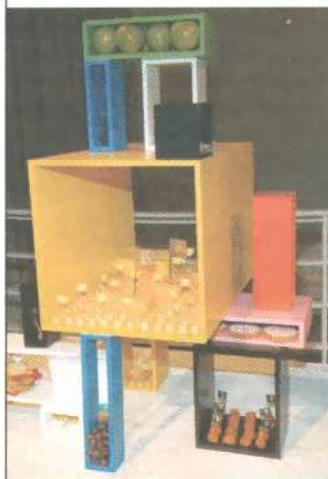
Moss liked the juxtaposition of the new and old, especially Job Smeets for Royal Tichelaar Makkum, the event's sponsor and a centuries-old ceramics company. "To have young artists share the space with the oldest company in the Netherlands is a lovely and correct idea." Even Julianne Moore checked out the scene.

Edelkoort's next project is what she calls a "humanitarian effort" to try to revive the textile industry in its mills in Prato and Como, as well as India, which have been hard hit by China's dominance in recent years. She is hoping to pull together a symposium of fashion leaders to discuss the problem.

— Rosemary Feitelberg



Donna Karan and Li Edelkoort



Kiki van Ejjik's work.



Dressing Dutch at Weiss Studio.

DUTCH PHOTOS BY STEVE ECHNER

Scott Bowman Heads to Polo

NEW YORK — Polo Ralph Lauren Corp. tapped Scott Bowman as president of international business development, a new post.

Before joining Polo, Bowman was president of Scott Bowman Associates, a consultancy firm he founded in 2003, which focused on offering global retailers and brands business development support and strategic planning services. According to Bowman, the consultancy will now "be winding down."

Prior to launching his firm, Bowman was chief executive officer of Marc Jacobs, a division of LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton. He managed the label's planning from licensing to the expansion of Jacobs' retail network in Asia. He had also been president and ceo of DFS Mid-Pacific Region and held several management posts at Limited Brands, Macy's and Maas Brothers/Jordan Marsh.

At Polo, he will be in charge of the company's businesses in Australia, Far East Asia, Japan and South and Central America, some of which are licensed, and he will report to Roger Farah, Polo's president and chief operating officer.

"He brings leadership to our long-term strategic initiative to increase the Ralph Lauren business internationally, specifically in the luxury markets in Japan and the Pacific Rim," Farah said in a statement.