

Contemporary Designer: Ashley and Mary-Kate Olsen for The Row

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Background

Ashley and Mary-Kate Olsen, designers for The Row, were born in Sherman Oaks, California, an affluent mostly white, non-diverse neighborhood in the San Fernando Valley region of Los Angeles (Sherman Oaks Profile-Mapping L.A., 2015). At twenty-nine years old, these actresses have been permanent fixtures in the entertainment industry and have been in the public eye since their first acting job at nine months old (Barron, 2013). They retired from acting at eighteen in 2004 to attend college and assumed ownership of their product licensing and entertainment company Dualstar, which they founded in 1993 at the age of six (Mower, 2011). When this business transfer occurred, the sisters were worth an estimated \$274 million (Slowey, 2011). In 2006, two years after the Olsens moved from Los Angeles to New York City to attend college, they founded The Row (Slowey, 2011). This new business venture was not far from what the sisters have done in the past through licensing. The difference was in the passion, influence, and complete ownership of the brand.

Education and start of the business

The Row was founded when the sisters moved to Manhattan to attend New York University. Although they did not go to school for design, Ashley interned with designer Zac Posen and Mary-Kate interned with photographer Annie Leibovitz (Moore, 2014). The Olsens wanted to design a luxury white t-shirt with a perfect fit to potentially sell in collaboration with The ONE Campaign to fight poverty in Africa. The sisters thought of a name for their t-shirt brand that would represent the immaculate tailoring it took to create the perfect garment. They decided to name the brand after Savile Row in London, which is known for being the home of “bespoke,” or made-to-measure clothing (Slowey, 2011). Instead of taking part in the campaign, the Olsens came to the conclusion that the type of product they wanted to produce was not currently represented in the market. This gave them the opportunity to create a line of understated, luxurious, and contemporary basics from an anonymous brand that could be worn with pieces like a tweed Chanel jacket. Their line progressed from the original t-shirt to a tank in the same fit, then a dress, a blazer, leather Ponte pant, and shirting. The sisters decided to push forward and design a full line of clothing including the founding basics without placing their names anywhere near the brand (Barron, 2013). Keeping with the “anonymous brand” theme, there are no labels or tags in any of

the clothing; the only branding consists of hardware that changes season to season in the form of a chain or metal bar (Slowey, 2011). Ultimately the Olsens' plan to ensure that the brand would progress and maintain its integrity without celebrity backing or branding was successful.

Target market

When comparing the price points of The Row to other brands, one will realize that the designers are targeting clientele that shop at popular fashion houses including brands such as Lanvin, Rick Owens, and Azzedine Alaïa (Brown, 2010). This became more evident when the brand released its first handbag collection in 2011. Headlining the collection was an alligator backpack with a \$39,000 price point. The designer's target market is an older woman between the ages of forty and fifty who is sophisticated, very knowledgeable about fashion, appreciates finer fabrics, and looks for superior craftsmanship (Smith, 2014). This client is also more likely to have the income available to purchase items within the brand's price points which range from \$250 (tank top) to \$48,000 (fine jewelry) (Moore, 2014). The Olsens' plan to position and align their brand with elite contenders in the industry ensures that more seasoned customers will acknowledge their brand and liken it to one of the established brands.

Design and production

The Olsens are known for having a personal style that is often described as "boho;" this style is present in their designs for The Row. The bohemian or "boho" style is known for being an overly layered, carefree, relaxed, oversized, and comfortable look (Barron, 2013). The designers' personal styles shine through with the play on volume, but the added element of fine tailoring and luxurious fabrics add sophistication. In an interview, Linda Fargo, Senior Vice President of Bergdorf Goodman's fashion office, described the Olsens' style as "cool, sexy, and effortless with a nonchalance" (Karimzadeh, 2011). In the same 2011 article, Fargo spoke about what makes The Row different from other designer collections carried by Bergdorf Goodman:

These are non-fashion pieces—meaning they are instant classics without the hook of perishable trends. I don't think there's any other collection like it in the designer market. It purposefully lacks edge, designer bells and whistles. It's a stealth success story with a cult following (Karimzadeh, 2011).

The Row's Spring 2016 collection was shown about an hour outside of Paris in a 17th-century château at a dinner that was only open to exclusive clients invited by the brand (Mower, 2015). The Château de Courances, a Louis XIII style estate, was completed in 1630 and currently serves as a private home (Château de Courances-Presentation, 2015). At the press preview, which was held one day before the show, editors and retailers were shown thirteen of the thirty looks at the brand's Paris showroom for a three hour period. Photos were prohibited because the designers wanted to distribute in-house images for all upcoming press releases and choose who was able to view their collection. This is consistent with the

designers' business mantra, which focuses on clients and control (Iredale, 2015). The ability to ban the press from distributing photos of the collection before the presentation provided the brand with nonbiased feedback from their clients and a general feeling of exclusivity for those who attended.

The Row's social media presence is mostly focused on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. The brand does not hold contests or have celebrities endorse their product through these outlets. The commonality on all the different social media outlets is the representation of the designers' inspiration. Each outlet has a distinctive part in helping the consumer understand the brand's aesthetic and/or find a product used in a magazine editorial.

Designers' contribution to fashion

The Olsens have contributed to fashion in several ways since the launch of The Row. The most prominent way has been the acceptance of the sisters as true designers, transcending the celebrity designer licensing cliché. The Olsens have won three prestigious awards from the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA). This honor has earned the sisters legitimate recognition in the fashion industry, and has forged a path for future celebrities to be seriously considered as contenders or able partners in the fashion industry (Phelps, 2015).

Another important contribution has been the Olsens' decision to produce the majority of their line in America, setting an example for other brands. This is important for the fashion industry and the American economy, ensuring we focus on bringing manufacturing back to the United States, thereby providing jobs and helping brands manage their supply chain closer to headquarters (Timberlake, 2011). This will, in turn, help brands spend less on transport, bulk buying, and avoid the loss they experienced during the ports strike earlier this year (Weise & Woodyard, 2015). One can conclude that the brand serves as a spearhead for this campaign.

The Row has led the clean-line, classic American sportswear revival in the industry for the last few years. This has brought sophistication and simplicity back to fashion (Slowey, 2011). One may be inspired by the beautiful designs, wearability of the product, or the designers' strong business outlook and laser focus on what is right for the customer.

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