

Profile

MICKEY TAKER

Irreverent bling reigns at his Cannes villa, but luxury goods supremo Philipp Plein is made of stern stuff

PHOTOGRAPHY: RONALD DICK | WRITER: AMY SERAFIN

The first thing you notice in the courtyard of Philipp Plein's villa in Cannes is the garage, open to reveal a trio of testosterone-raising toys: a Lamborghini, a Ferrari, a Harley-Davidson. The message 'Every Weapon Needs a Master' is written in a heavy-metal font and coloured lights on the back wall. On the way to the pool, you can't miss the 2.3m-tall statue of a red gorilla beating his chest. In Cannes, houses have names, and Plein dubbed his 'La Jungle du Roi'. The gorilla notwithstanding, there's no question who's king here. In less than a decade 37-year-old Plein has built a global luxury fashion brand with an annual turnover of €200m and stores from Moscow to Macao. He has created an empire in a business that can seem all but closed-off to newcomers, and done it on his own.

Tall and lean with a friendly face and short gelled hair, Plein dresses almost exclusively in his eponymous brand. Today that means black jeans, a black cashmere V-neck with a Swarovski skull on the back and black leather shoes. A Red Bull in hand, he settles onto a couch under the gaze of two zebra heads and talks about his meteoric rise.

Born to an upper-middle-class family in Munich, he wanted to be an entrepreneur but pursued a law degree, finding it more practical than an MBA. He loved art and architecture, yet feared he wouldn't succeed as an artist. Instead, in an effort to be financially independent during his studies, he started designing furniture, figuring that it 'gives you the possibility to reproduce your art pieces and make money out of it, like Warhol did.' He made stainless steel furniture inspired by Mies Van der Rohe»



PHILIPP PLEIN AT HIS SAINT-TROPEZ PARTY PALACE. MIRRORRED PANELS, CHART SKULLS AND MICKEY MOUSE ARE RECURRING THEMES IN HIS DESIGNS

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THE POOL IS LIT BY UNDERWATER LEDS AND SURROUNDED BY GREER CAZIBOS



and Le Corbusier, produced by industrial steel manufacturers. To drum up business, he printed flyers and stuffed them into mailboxes in his parents' neighbourhood.

Eventually he started doing the rounds at trade shows in Paris, Cologne and Milan. He recalls his first Salone del Mobile, where he and a girlfriend stayed in a motel room they had to vacate each day because it was rented out by the hour. But with each show his orders increased, and a growing roster of interior architects hired him to furnish spaces such as hotel bars and yachts. By subcontracting his production, working to order and using his parents' basement as his office, he had few overheads and no debt.

In 2001, he noticed that the fashion business had gone crazy for crocodile-printed leather, and he found somebody in Italy who could print pigskins big enough for furniture. The first sample he ordered was too thick for sofas, so he covered a table with the skin and brought it to Cologne. 'It was my first big success,' he says. 'I turned over more than a million [euros] in the first year. Nobody in

the furniture industry was using printed crocodile yet.' Unsurprisingly, he dropped out of law school that same year.

Always with his eye on an opportunity, he took his leftover leather scraps and used them to produce wallets and handbags. Asked to furnish a lounge for a champagne brand during the Bread & Butter clothing trade show in Cologne, he negotiated the opportunity to display his handbags and sold €300,000-worth in three days.

Gradually he turned away from furniture and towards fashion, targeting the luxury market. He felt that consumers were bored with the same offerings and open to something new – but only if it really stood out. 'When you are not a brand, people will not buy your name,' he says. 'The only thing I could go for is a strong product.'

Understanding that straight-ahead, unapologetic bling was a potential cash cow (and not only in new-money markets), he offered sexiness, swagger and Swarovski in equal parts, with price tags to rival the most covered luxury brands. The company

moved quickly into Russia and China, places Plein calls 'hungry to consume'. Today they remain his biggest markets.

'He found a clientele that really likes this kind of style,' says Franca Sozzani, editor-in-chief of *Vogue Italia*. They met about five years ago, when she turned down his selection of photos for an advertising campaign. They've since become friendly, and sometimes she gives him informal advice. Sozzani says his approach to growing the brand has been unique: 'In the beginning, his success didn't come through the press. He had many stockists, and he found his own clients. He only used the press later on, so he did exactly the opposite that everybody else is doing.'

He proved himself a master at marketing, too. In 2008, he managed to get Naomi Campbell to pose for him in Ibiza, and she also walked in his cowgirl-themed show in February 2014. Terry Richardson and Steven Klein have photographed his campaigns, starring bad girls from Mischa Barton to Lindsay Lohan (whom Plein reportedly dated). His over-the-top runway shows, held in Milan, have featured a military helicopter, a Vegas-style casino, and Theophilus London rapping from a jet ski in a swimming pool.

In 2008 Plein's first retail store opened in Monte Carlo, and since then the brand has expanded to nearly 50 boutiques around the



world. In each one, customers are greeted by an enormous skull covered in Swarovski crystals and custom-made Murano chandeliers with glass skulls on the branches. Most are franchises, though lately the house has started opening its own stores, and is buying out some of its franchise partners. The designer says he has no outside investors. 'We are 100 per cent independent. We don't have one euro in loans or a credit line from a bank.'

Now he's targeting more mature markets. Over the last year he's opened stores in Miami, on New York's Madison Avenue and LA's Rodeo Drive. This spring he lands in the UK with a three-level shop on New Bond Street, London. By the end of the year, he plans to have over 80 stores worldwide. Plein still does all the designing, overseeing a creative team of ten and turning out 12 collections a year, for men, women and children. He says everything is produced in the highest quality Italian factories, and that he personally controls all the prototypes. Back in the office, he verifies every invoice.

As we are talking, some men in ties are sitting in a meeting room of the house. They are accountants, and at one point they all go out together to sign papers for the Cannes boutique. Plein actually lives in Lugano, Switzerland. The Riviera house is a workspace and a party palace – guest bedrooms have



TOP: THE MIRROR-PANELLED LIVING ROOM FEATURES PHILIPP PLEIN CUSHIONS AND THROWS AND A SIGNATURE GLITZY SKULL ON THE COFFEE TABLE
ABOVE: A GORILLA STATUE GUARDS THE WAY TO THE SWIMMING POOL

names like Lust and Envy. When he bought the house three years ago it had been empty for a while. The garden, he says, was 'a fucking jungle'. Remembering an iconic club in Saint-Tropez, Les Caves du Roy, he decided to name this place La Jungle du Roi, and the jungle theme inspired the rest. Currently he's renovating a smaller house at the front, where he'll put a real stuffed lion.

The living room where we chat is both virile and baroque, with one wall in dark grey marble and another tiled in mirrors. He silver-plated the carved wooden ceiling, put shag rugs on the floors, and covered the sofas with his own fur cushions – including one embroidered in crystals: 'Rich girls will take your heart, bitch girls will take your money'. The real party space is downstairs, where a spa boasts an exposed round tub, and a marble bar bearing the message 'Champagne Sucker!' is set near two Mickey Mouse statues. All that's missing is Paris Hilton.

Few in the fashion industry saw Plein coming – or if they did, they failed to take him seriously. And yet, he has proven himself a force to be reckoned with. 'There's a lot of brands out there that have an amazing image, a big name, but they don't make money,' he says. 'I'm here to sell. I don't want to die beautiful. I want to die rich and successful.' ★ philipp-plein.com

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