

Finishing Touch

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Photo By: Pasha Antonov

Ulrich Grimm, Calvin Klein Inc.

Growing a minimalist brand in the world of accessories.

An accessory, as defined by Merriam-Webster, is “an object or device not essential in itself but adding to the beauty, convenience, or effectiveness of something else.” So it would seem that Ulrich Grimm, creative director of accessories of Calvin Klein Inc., a firm whose apparel is known for its austerity and utter lack of decoration, has his work cut out for him.

But Grimm, who started with the company over a decade ago, sees his job not only as a challenge but an obsession.

“We are not about putting bells and whistles on shoes,” said Grimm, who oversees Calvin Klein men’s and women’s shoes and accessories spanning the multiple labels produced by CKI. “We are about shape and

structure.”

Grimm, a native of Germany who studied in Paris and had stints at Joop, Anne Klein and Bogner, has had a long run in accessories and footwear — he has also freelanced for Fendi and Sonia Rykiel. He joined Calvin Klein in 1996 to launch the ck Calvin Klein footwear line, and left the company briefly to work as design director for women’s handbags and shoes at Coach. He returned to Calvin Klein in 1998 to reprise his role at ck Calvin Klein shoes and was later promoted to design director of the firm’s men’s and women’s footwear and accessories. In 2006, he was elevated to his current position, where he oversees the direction of shoes and accessories for the Calvin Klein Collection, ck Calvin Klein, Calvin Klein white label and Calvin Klein Jeans brands.

Accessories are a growing segment across all the Klein brands, according to Grimm. “We are a ready-to-wear house and an accessories house,” he said. “Calvin Klein has always been an apparel brand, but Calvin was always about having the complete look. It was always treated as a lifestyle business.”

This past year the brand started opening freestanding ck Calvin Klein accessories stores in international markets such as Italy and Hong Kong. There is also a freestanding ck Calvin Klein watch and jewelry store on South Molton Street in London and another is planned for Hong Kong.

In addition to working alongside creative directors Francisco Costa and Italo Zucchelli, head of women’s and men’s Collection, respectively, and Kevin Carrigan, creative director of men’s and women’s Calvin Klein Jeans, ck Calvin Klein and Calvin Klein better sportswear, the firm has an array of licenses including Accessory Network Group for better bags and luggage in America; Cipriani/Max for belts for men and women in the U.S.; Itochu Corp. for men’s bridge bags in Japan; Jimlar, for better men’s and women’s footwear in the U.S., bridge footwear in Europe and Collection footwear globally; Madras Inc. for men’s bridge footwear in Japan; Marchon Eyewear Inc. for eyewear on a global scale; Pelleterie 1907 for Collection accessories, and Swatch Group Ltd. for global ck Calvin Klein and Calvin Klein Jeans jewelry and watches, except for in Japan, where Vendome Yamada Corp. makes the jewelry. There has also been a hosiery license agreement with American Essentials for the past 20 years, although Grimm doesn’t oversee that category.

Grimm, who is now working on pre-fall 2009, since the lead-time for footwear is greater than for apparel, is also dabbling in watches and making fine jewelry for Collection. (In the past, Grimm has created some diamond-laden pieces exclusively for the runway.)

“Within the company’s own stores, there is an effort to give accessories more of a presence and integrate them further with the apparel,” he said. Each line has its own attitude, but fits under the modernist Calvin Klein umbrella.

“As a visitor, when you come here, there is a certain DNA and vocabulary that is in every line,” said Grimm. “It helps when you don’t cannibalize yourself....It’s a constant meeting and regrouping.”

One of Grimm’s signatures for the brand’s footwear for Collection is the sculptural heel and sole. For bags, he creates totes, satchels and clutches in clean shapes and luxe materials such as stingray, alligator, lizard and even bullfrog. Grimm and his team are also apt to create proprietary fabrics that have a special sheen and hand.

Unlike other fashion brands with burgeoning accessories categories such as Chloé, Michael Kors and Balenciaga, none of the Calvin Klein lines is known for an “It” bag. While a hero handbag has historically

proven to be a sales driver, Grimm is keen on his designs fitting into the larger Calvin Klein scheme, rather than overpowering the look.

“Calvin Klein has been built as a true lifestyle brand,” said Suzanne Hader, principal of 400twin Luxury Brand Consulting. “Since the vision is minimalist and sophisticated, it would be a disconnect if they tried to compete with Gucci or Dior in the ‘It’ bag department.”

Grimm concurred. “We’re not zoomed in on one category,” he mused, “so I’m not stifled.”

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