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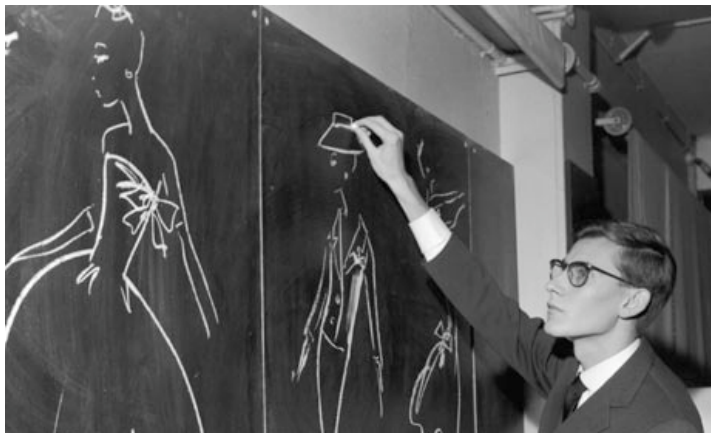
The return of face furniture

Glasses are back - and the key look is nerdy but sexy. Simon Chilvers celebrates

In pictures: How glasses got sexy

Simon ChilversThe Guardian, Friday 6 February 2009

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French designer Yves Saint Laurent. Photograph: RDA/Getty Images

The most interesting style heroes have always been those behind glass. The designer Yves Saint Laurent, who was short-sighted, wore glasses from an early age, and favoured chunky frames throughout his life. From the beginning of his career, the press saw him as a kind of vulnerable genius, an image underscored by his glasses. The thickness of the frames, almost too heavy for his slight frame, gave an instant air of someone intellectually creative.

Andy Warhol was heavily identified with his glasses, from the harsh black angular shapes he wore in the 60s to the clear perspex rectangular ones of the 70s. The look was slightly anti-fashion, with an art-school geek twist; the graphic shapes and plastic frames of his specs tapped into his Pop Art aesthetic.

Like both Saint Laurent and Warhol, David Hockney has made glasses a signature look throughout his career. In the 60s, he balanced a rebellious mop of bleached yellow hair with a pair of solid, round-rimmed frames. He evolved this look into messier, dirty blond hair worn with tortoiseshell glasses. Hockney's glasses have become the key item that changes in a wardrobe that rarely strays from a recipe of cardies and slacks; a brilliant, vaguely eccentric British look.

With the overload of pretty celebrities in 2009, the power of glasses to cut through the chaff is even greater. Alexa Chung, whose look revolves around an offbeat boyishness rather than high-octane glamour, is the ideal pin-up for the specs revival. Actor Jaime Winstone was clearly gunning for extra cool points when she chose to rock a hefty tortoiseshell pair recently. Hip-hop royalty are getting stuck in too. Kanye West, Pharrell Williams and Jay-Z have all been swapping statement pap-proof shades for

quirky nerd-like specs instead. Meanwhile, at a cinema near you, Gus Van Sant's *Milk*, set in the 70s, features Cleve Jones, a young gay activist (played by Emile Hirsch) whose square specs fit brilliantly with this current revival.

Over in East London, vintage-looking spec-shapes have become an integral part of the sexy-nerd unisex look that has developed from the blending of the American Apparel aesthetic - the store naturally stocks vintage-sourced specs - and the ongoing evolution of indie-kid chic. The latter boasts two natural spec heroes: in the 80s corner, Morrissey (NHS specs with quiff); in the 90s, Jarvis Cocker (dorky frames, skinny hips). Meanwhile on the catwalks, designers such as Luella and Phillip Lim included perky 50s-inspired women's glasses, and even uber-glam design duo Dolce & Gabbana went for a catwalk specs-spectacular this season. Stefano Gabbana says: "Constantly we see people wearing glasses even when they don't need them. They add elegance."

River Island, Topman and New Look are all selling specs with clear glass. Glasses add character, according to Sean Ryan, head of menswear design at New Look. At a time when menswear is not changing much, Ryan says men are looking to interesting accessories to pep up their wardrobes.

Anna Laub, creative director of Prism, a new high-end glasses label launching next month (Kanye West is already a fan), believes the current specs moment is all about a return to individuality. "Everyone is looking for ways to differentiate themselves at the moment. As you wear glasses on your face, it's the first thing people see, so you want them to look exciting, don't you?"

Carrie Mundane, designer, Cassette Playa

I've got three pairs of glasses. Vintage Cazals, which I put prescription lenses in, and another vintage pair with big plastic purple frames, really cartoonish, from Arckiv in Camden. I don't really like new glasses. Glasses are having a fashion moment now; maybe people are realising it's OK to be a nerd. Giles Deacon wears glasses well; Keith Haring and Janet Street-Porter too. And Jarvis Cocker, who reminds me of when I was a kid and wore massive NHS glasses.

KS, rapper, Young Fathers

I wear Armani specs as my day-to-day reading glasses. Black Alan Carr-ish ones. But my going-out, looking-fresh glasses are my Cazals. I got tired of bog-standard glasses and decided to go for something more outrageous to wear out. I love Cazals, they remind me of old school hip-hop. Jam Master Jay of Run DMC always looked good in glasses. Before you wouldn't have seen people rocking glasses in the way they do now. On our trips to London, I've seen people wearing frames without the lenses in. I went to this club recently, and saw someone wearing those construction glasses. I thought oh my goodness man, glasses are making a comeback!

Caryn Franklin, fashion writer/broadcaster

I've got quite a long face so I like quite an obvious horizontal shape and a strong frame. I tend to buy plastic glasses. I've got a pair by Booth & Bruce, who are English designers. Some Gucci, of course. Prada, Alain Mikli and Ralph Lauren. I've got a couple of pairs from some of them. I'm wearing about four different pairs at the moment. They are the same shape but have different tones on the frames, different coloured lenses. It just depends what I'm wearing and what I want to channel. Glasses are like facial confectionery - a delicious thing to put on. It's a chance to dress up in a

sea of mass-market uniform. Glasses give you edge.

Dev Hynes, Lightspeed Champion, singer/songwriter

I got these glasses cheap at a store called Fabulous Fanny's, the first week I moved to New York. I was actually hell-bent on getting contacts because I've worn glasses my whole life and was sick of people asking, "Are those prescription?" But a friend said I should check out this store before I made the leap into contacts. I wanted a pair of glasses - and I'm not ashamed to say this - that looked like I worked in an office in 1976.

Alys Sara Hale, model and singer

I wear an old pair of frames in tortoiseshell. I chose them because of the shape and their ability to obscure most of my face. They project my more geeky unfashionable side. For castings, I ditch my glasses, as clients want to see my face. But I wear big glasses on stage to hide my nerves - until they start steaming up! Like all other clothes or accessories they make a statement, but one more linked to intellect and androgyny rather than fashion or money. People tend to advise that you don't go above your eyebrow or below your cheekbone, but I think the only thing you can do wrong is choose a pair that are dull. Contacts are for practicality, glasses are an excuse for face furniture.

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