

STYLE

STYLE GUIDE

Clare Finney long ago gave up on her naive dreams of being a fashion designer. But that didn't stop her jumping at the chance of spending a day at the American Intercontinental University, learning hat-making from one of the world's top milliners





Around about the age of 15 – long after we all stopped wanting to be vets, but some time before alighting on journalism – I decided I would be a fashion designer.

I'd been to Oxford Circus. I knew the score. And if anyone was going to lead the next generation of cargo-pant victims towards the bright lights of Topshop, it was me – enthusiastic art student and self-appointed stylist of St Helen's girls, Northwood.

If only I'd taken a closer look inside that mannequin-filled window along Marylebone High Street. I'd have heard of the American Intercontinental University. I'd have seen the discerning fashion students, their bulging notebooks and their fabric swatches. And I'd have known, without the embarrassment of DIY distressed denim and tie-dying, that there's an awful lot more to designing clothes than meets the eye.

Last week I finally found myself inside the glass walls. Charged with writing a feature-length guide to this singular and unexpected presence on Marylebone's busiest retail street – an international university – I was painstakingly dressed (Topshop, head-to-toe) and determined to discover just what it takes to turn a hopeless fashion victim into a fashion designer.

"A lot of what we do is very cutting edge, very conceptual... but underlying all of that are the traditional skills and that's very much what we're teaching – skills to construct garments, but the ability to work conceptually as well."

Meet Dean Gill Stark, head of fashion at AIU and the lynchpin behind the department's growing reputation. Educated at fashion schools here and abroad, Gill's passion for fashion first found its home in the wonderful world of underwear. "I owned a lovely lingerie and nightwear company, that's my

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design area,” she explains, with a sweetness of expression that well belies her rather saucy credentials. Gill believes strongly that having tutors with industry experience is a crucial part of a well-rounded education and, as such, has gone out of her way to ensure her staff list is peppered with professionals.

“We all have experience working in the industry, and lot of tutors come in who are still working there,” she tells says. “They are good academics but also good industry people – so students are learning what’s happening in the real world”.

One such bigwig is the millinery tutor Prudence, designer at the renowned Prudence Millinery. While Gill’s style of ‘brief’ has changed somewhat over the years, Prudence is still very much in the tailoring trade. Last year, she fashioned collections for Vivienne Westwood, Tom Ford and the Sex and the City movie. Her

hats, Gill says, encapsulate what it is about AIU that marks it out from other fashion courses.

“A lot of what we do is very cutting edge, very conceptual – but underlying all of that are the traditional skills, and that’s very much what Prudence is teaching: traditional millinery skills, but from which you could produce something very conceptual, even wacky”.

Not all of this is moodboards and memory maps either. Downstairs in the tailor-made millinery classroom, Prudence is taking a fresh-faced fashionista through the materials she’ll be needing over the coming few weeks. The list of fabrics alone is astonishing, and that’s before Prudence gets to the various ways in which you could combine them.

“What you don’t want is to use the double silk georgette, then use the velvet, then introduce another cotton velvet with the silk velvet and another

silk georgette and then a jersey. You can’t do that. The only time you can do that is when its black. Then you can use the velvet, the georgette, organza, fur – as many as possible because it makes it look quite rich – but otherwise two fabrics maximum. OK?”

The class nods sagely and I catch sight of Tom, my photographer, raising his eyebrows in disbelief. “And I thought velvet was velvet!” he whispers. There follows a catalogue of names, numbers and directions for haberdasheries, rattled off at breathtaking speed.

“There’s a place called Ostrich Feather Company near Old Street, they’ve got real birds. If they don’t, go to this fly fishing supplier and they’ll give you wings and lovely things like that.” She scribbles frantically on the whiteboard. “For the capelin you’ll need the ground floor of MacCulloch & Wallis on Dering Street.” She pauses for a moment, but only for breath.

“And if you don’t see any there then call this haberdashery in Luton and tell them what you need.”

Given Prudence’s alleged aversion to technology (“I’m still getting my head around mobile phones,” she confides afterwards. “How do they work without cords?”) her rate of recall is not that surprising – after all, she has been calling her suppliers “nearly every day for 20 years”. What does surprise me though is the sheer quality of the materials she expects her keen protégés to purchase. Is £120 for real birds not just a little excessive?

Not if you want to succeed, argues Prudence. “There are other places, but they’re geared towards mass production and the quality is terrible.” She points out that many of the images the students showed in class as ‘inspiration’ were hats not bad in design, but in execution. “Bad quality hats end up looking too ‘mother of the bride’, or they have that ‘drag queen’ sort of look. And I don’t even know any drag queen who would want to wear that kind of hat. All the drag queens I know in London are very into fashion.”

It’s a bit harsh, perhaps, but then name me a decent designer who isn’t. Each aspirant who studies fashion at the AIU is being equipped with both the skills and the experience to make a career with even the world’s most respected fashion houses a justifiable ambition – from Primark right through to the heady heights of McQueen. “We’re not commercial – we’re conceptual – but students can adapt either way,” Gill explains amiably. “They can go to the commercial side of industry if they wish, or they can continue to work conceptually, because they have the skills to do both.”

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Prudence, somewhat predictably, is less open to the idea of her students starting life on the high street. “If you get your first job in, say, Mango, you can’t go up because it’s not design-led,” she argues, with the same wrinkle of her nose she gave at the thought of fake bird feathers. “Whereas if you start in couture and decide to move to Mango then they’ll suck you up in a minute.”

Needless to say, the emphasis at the AIU is firmly on quality – of materials, work experience, staff and of course, location. Chatting to the students over a much-needed coffee break, I find that for many of them it’s not just the tutoring that makes AIU the university of choice, but also its setting inside the beating heart of Britain’s fashion-forward capital.

“I went to school in California, studied in Arizona, went to Italy for a bit, and to the University of Kent – but I think this is really the first time I’ve had lesson from someone who’s really on trend,” explains Jay Lewis, staring admiringly up at Prudence’s contact-strewn whiteboard. For some, it’s being surrounded by London’s shops and suppliers; for others, it’s the proximity of the college to great cultural institutions. “Last week Pauline just said we should pop to the Wallace Collection, where so many designers go for inspiration – and there it was, five minutes down the street,” marvels Hilary Hanks. “That would never happen in the States”.

Mulling things over in the Wallace Collection is one bonus. Potentially bumping into Vivienne Westwood on Marylebone Lane is another. But it is at the AIU’s catwalk shows that their Marylebone location really comes into its own. Next month will see the students join forces with various local businesses to support the Esther Benjamin Trust – a charity in Nepal that rescues children who have been kidnapped and sold into circuses. “They don’t have celebrity backing, they’re not pushy at all. They’re just a wonderful charity who do amazing work,” says Gill.



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The staff at the nearby Electric salon, who are doing the hair, agree, as do the Session School people who routinely help AIU students with their make-up. Even Waitrose is involved, but then Waitrose is involved in most things in Marylebone. And with a fair number of the students having interned in the village’s boutiques, each outfit bears the hallmark of Marylebone’s high fashion influence. “It is multicultural, yes, but with that strong tradition of very conceptual fashion. And also they learn that fashion doesn’t just come from clothing it comes from music, film, clubs, seeing what people are wearing,” reflects Gill, looking up at the blow up shoot of last years photos in the AIUs front. “It’s wonderful to be in this area.” Following her gaze, I can’t help but agree: I’ve seen the bright lights of the fashion industry – and they’re not shining from Topshop.