

## New fashion for young faces

Where in Canada is a young fashion plate to turn for cool glasses?

by Craig Saunders

In Canada, most kids seem to live happily with the selection of mass-market frames available to them. But every so often, a kid, or their parent, comes in who wants something more. They want the upmarket stylings of a designer frame.

For these kids, there are few options on the market. But, just as fashion designers are starting to think small, so to are some eyewear designers.

“One of my neighbours has a little girl who needed glasses,” says Mike Christiansen, designer of Venus Eye Design, based in Edmonton. “They searched the entire city and didn’t get anything cool.”

Frustrated, he asked them what they wanted. They wanted stylish, trendy glasses for their daughter, much like the ones, designed by Christiansen, that they were wearing. So he set out to adapt his designs for smaller faces. And thus, about a year ago, his first kids’ collection, called qt-pie, came out. The collection includes 15 models, each in five colours, making it a sizable launch. Today, about 1200 accounts in Canada, as well as some in Europe and Australia. The frames come in vibrant, kid-friendly colours—tangerine, bubblegum pink, lemon-lime. This spring will see an additional seven models added, again each in five or six colours.

His frames are a bit edgier than mainstream kids’ frames, but not so far as to be bizarre. What they are is stylish and upscale with added attention to fashionable details. For example, on the front of a frame he’ll use two layers of aluminium, each with a different colour and finish. With a spacer in between, this gives the frames depth and contrast. It’s not so pronounced as to immediately leap out and scream “Look at me, I’m wearing funky glasses!” but instead provides a subtler, attractive contrast.

For obvious reasons, the kids’ market is comparatively small. Many designers don’t create kids’ frames at all, and larger manufacturers tend to go for mass-market appeal. This is easy to understand. There’s an economy of scale that’s important in eyewear, and it’s difficult to achieve in kids’ frames. Kids also go through glasses pretty quickly. They outgrow them, which makes parents wary of shelling out the bucks for fancy frames. They also break them, so again, parents are cautious.

“What we see is that parents are kind of matching their kids to them. Which isn’t as awful as it sounds,” says Maureen Atkinson, senior partner at the Toronto-based retail consulting company J.C. Williams Group. “If they love Barneys, they want their kids to wear Barneys. In response to that, you have designers doing lines in kids, babies, much younger than you’d expect.”

There is a trend toward younger fashion design. It's a growing market, but still a niche one, as most kids' apparel is still made for low price and high turnover, she says.

"It's a good growth segment for designer companies, but its impact on the total kids' market is pretty small," she says.

If you need illustration of that trend toward the younger, look no farther than French designer eyewear mainstay Lafont, which has just introduced its first collection for babies.

"Our designer had her first two granddaughters last year and said 'Oh, my god, what if they have to wear glasses? They're all hideous,'" says Ray Khalil, head of Lafont's North American operations. In response, the company developed two frames—oval and round to suit the soft features of a baby – available in four colours. They have a special bridge for infants, rubberized interiors, and a very high degree of flexibility.

This is just the latest addition from Lafont, which has a long history of creating designer frames for kids, including one collection for kids aged 4-7, and one for older kids. According to Khalil, their approach differs from that of Christiansen. Rather than modify adult frames, Lafont starts from the ground up with its kids' frames.

They start with shapes suited to kids' faces—softer for the younger ones who have less developed, less angular features, a bit more variety for the older ones—and a colour palette that's fashionable, but more kid-oriented. Sometimes it parallels what's happening in adult frames, and sometimes it doesn't.

In 2007, they added a new aspect to their design. It's a temple with pre-measured notches along the temple. This makes it easy to fit the frame for length without measuring. And because the cut end tucks into a flange, no filing is required either. This innovation won Lafont the Silmo D'Or award for kids' frames, the second award they've won in the category.

Market size and warranties are two reasons why kids' frames aren't the most attractive to eyewear designers. Another reason we may not see as many upscale kids' frames in Canada is a shift away from designer frames for kids here. Up-market frames, such as Lafont's which also have an up-market price tag, decreased in market share, says Khalil. But that's a trend that has begun to reverse itself in the last couple years, he says. Still, kids' frames constitute 10-15 per cent of Lafont's sales here, whereas they account for more than 35 per cent in Europe.

That could be a good sign for designers. There's clearly room for growth in the designer market for kids. And with comparatively little competition on the upper end of the market, it might be one that's ripe for the picking, as Christiansen and Venus Eye Designs also seem to be realizing. And Lafont is certainly seeing the benefit of the designing younger trend. After only one show, one-quarter of their production for the baby frames had already sold. •