

Northern lights

Canadian designers brighten up the world fashion stage.

by Lorri Benedik

Canada is the second largest country in the world. However, with numbers hovering slightly above 33 million, our ranking by population is 36th, just below Algeria. The good news is that what we lack in quantity of people, we more than make up for in quality. Canadians are a creative and talented bunch. Many of our recording artists, actors and comedians are pop culture icons, standing shoulder to shoulder with the best and brightest on the planet. Our eyewear designers are no exception. Here are a few world-class eyewear designers who live and work above the 49th parallel.

Carpe diem

At 18, Mike Christiansen left his family home in Camrose, Alta., a farming community of 10,000 just outside Edmonton. He moved to the big city to study business and dreamt of pursuing studies in architecture, down the road. But Christiansen started working for an optical company, in sales, and within three years was promoted to sales manager for western Canada. “I really enjoyed being on the road every day, talking with my clients,” said Christiansen. “And what I heard them saying, quite consistently, was that their frame needs were not being met—there were serious gaps in the product lines they were being offered.”

In 2001, Christiansen took a leap of faith. He created Venus Eye Design with just six of his own frames. In seven years, Venus has grown to include five product lines with 350 models and a sales representative in every province. “All of this came about simply because I was a good listener,” continued Christiansen. “And even today, I don’t hesitate to create a new model because a single customer requests it; I imagine that if one person wants it, others will too.” An idea for a new frame might begin with a unique swoop of a brow bar or a novel hinge or screw design. For Christiansen, it’s of utmost importance that a frame be practical, easy to use and look good. For each new concept he begins by having a few prototypes made and offers them to his reps to show around. Feedback from his clients still means everything to him.

Venus Eye Design frames are fashioned out of an assortment of materials; laminates (layered plastics), pressed aluminium or stainless steel and are available in a broad range of vibrant shades that are soft enough to be versatile and complementary to a variety of skin tones. And Christiansen’s deep understanding of human nature comes through in another way—in the mouth-watering names he gives his colours; cherry cheese cake, spiced pumpkin, peanut butter ripple, bumbleberry pie and rocky road, to name just a few. He knows that these tasty names make his frames “pop out” to customers.

Venus Eye Designs are currently marketed mostly in Canada. “I perceive Europe as an open door because the people are so fashion-conscious,” said Christiansen. “And Australia will be my next big venture.”

Vive la différence!

Observing him today, it's hard to believe that as a child Iranian-born Mehran Baghaie presented a quiet demeanour, which endured all the way through high school. He was raised in the peace-loving Bahá'í faith and during his teen years worked summers in his uncle's optical shop. In the early 1980s, with Iran at war, 16-year-old Baghaie left his homeland and came to Canada, settling on the West Coast.

It was while studying psychology in Vancouver and working part time for an optical firm that he made the decision to pursue a career as an optician. He enrolled at the British Columbia College of Opticians and received his license in 1989. "I enjoyed working in the optical industry but I tend to get bored very easily," admitted Baghaie. "I became frustrated with the lack of really interesting, funky frames available." He had his own idea of what was cool and began to illustrate it. His depictions were very different and innovative; they featured sharp angles, influences from his intense interest in Goth culture, tribal art and tattooing.

In 1997 he launched Spectacle Eyeworks with four of his own creations. They were very well received. "My thoughts and imagination are limitless," he said. "Designing provides me with the stimulation I require to stay focused and interested." Baghaie has always had a fascination with human faces. "I find that I am often out of sync with conventions of society—what most people may define as a facial flaw is precisely what I find most beautiful about it," he continued. "For example, my line of frames for men, Brow Meister, was inspired by my own uni-brow which kids teased me about, as a child." His women's line, Pussy Galore, features a dozen variations of cat-eye shapes in divinely feminine colours. And his Scorpio Anthology was conceived based on Baghaie's zodiac sign and features unique interchangeable temples for added versatility. He is also currently working on new designs linked to his uncommon Chinese astrological sign—the fire horse.

When Baghaie started Spectacle Eyeworks he focussed on marketing his products in Canada. But soon he branched out, showing off his creations in the U.S., Europe and Asia. His frames met with rave reviews worldwide and have attracted plenty of attention—quite a coup in this dynamic and competitive industry. In the past few years, several of Baghaie's designs have picked up coveted award nominations in Paris and Tokyo.

A nice niche

It was 25 years ago that Canadian cycling champion, Louis Garneau, launched his Quebec City-based company. Garneau and his wife began designing, manufacturing and distributing specialized clothing for cycling enthusiasts—all from his father's garage. When Garneau retired from active competition he focused on his growing business. Six years later, after several moves to increasingly larger premises, they added helmets to their product line and began distributing all over North American and overseas. Today, Louis Garneau is still one of the largest distributors of cycling helmets in the world.

In 1996 they decided to develop a line of sports sunglasses. “The only way we felt we could compete internationally was to focus on our niche market—mainly cyclists,” said Denis Gingras, accessories division manager for Louis Garneau Sports. “Our first sunglasses were sold as kits; one frame with three or four interchangeable lenses, which allowed users to purchase one pair of glasses and still be prepared for changing road and weather conditions.” Gingras explained that climate is a key element to consider when designing glasses for any outdoor aerobic activity. In cold weather goggles and glasses tend to fog up a lot because of the contrast between skin and air temperatures. Good air circulation is a critical component of their frame design. In addition, it has always been a priority for their sunglasses and helmets to fit together seamlessly, like puzzle pieces.

Today, Louis Garneau Sports offers six lines of sports sunglasses including Lite Vent, which was conceived to offer the best possible aeration. They feature vented bridges and frames, and even the lenses have teardrop-shaped cut-outs to promote maximum air circulation and reduce fogging to a minimum. Their Transformer line consists of five kits—some with interchangeable stems and others with interchangeable lenses of different colours.

Intelligent designer

The man who came up with the original sport eyewear line for Louis Garneau, back in the mid 1990s is industrial designer, Paul Isabelle, who today has his own company, I-Design, in St. Augustin-des-Maures, Que., close to Quebec City. “I guess one could say that my expertise has a distinctly mechanical-engineering tilt,” said Isabelle, who was born and raised in Ottawa. In addition to designing specialized glasses for cyclists, Isabelle develops protective eyewear concepts for downhill and cross-country skiing, golf and hockey. Outside of the sports world, his industrial applications have included military and police eyewear and medical lenses.

“During the designing process I have to keep several priorities in mind at the same time; styling, dimensioning, proper clearances, position of use, ventilation and coverage,” said Isabelle. He explained that for certain sports, like cycling, the user is likely to spend long periods of time in a heads-down position. This means that he will be looking through a different portion of the lens than someone who is running, skiing or golfing. “I also do a lot of research in the area of human anatomy and study the biological morphologies of the majority population for whom I am designing the eyewear,” said Isabelle. “For example, Americans tend to be more heavy-set than Canadians and Asian and African facial structures require different calculations to ensure proper contact and ventilation points.”

When creating a new model, Isabelle is involved in every phase of production; the designing aspect for which he uses three-dimensional software, rapid prototyping and testing, the tooling (making moulds for his frames and lenses) and injecting the plastics into the cavity. Because most of his clients’ production is now outsourced to other countries he must also establish and write-up standard manufacturing specifications for quality control purposes.

“Although I love what I do very much, eyewear design is a minefield today, especially when we get into the issue of patents,” Isabelle said. He explained that large manufacturers sometimes use patent lawsuits as weapons and harassment tools in an attempt to exasperate and eventually squeeze out smaller companies. Isabelle has sometimes had to help his clients defend themselves in court. And there are also concerns in the eyewear field, about industrial espionage and knock-offs. Just like in the clothing industry, shortly after a new design appears, the market may be flooded with copycat products.

Canadian eyewear designers are as diverse as our terrain. Their immense creativity and dynamism will surely continue to be rewarded with more and more recognition from the international community. •