

## ORIGINS

### THE AMERICAN DREAM

HE MAY HAVE BEEN BORN IN THE UNITED KINGDOM BUT COACH CREATIVE DIRECTOR STUART VEVERS CREDITS HIS OUTSIDER STATUS AS ONE REASON HE HAS BEEN ABLE TO SEPARATE THE KITSCH FROM THE COOL IN AMERICAN CULTURE. AS THE NEW YORK-BASED HERITAGE BRAND CELEBRATES 75 YEARS, *SLT* SPEAKS TO MR. VEVERS ON HIS AMBITIOUS PLANS FOR LEADING COACH INTO THE FUTURE WHILE STAYING TRUE TO ITS STAR-SPANGLED ROOTS. (HINT: IT INVOLVES MORE THAN JUST A NEW HANDBAG OR TWO)

Words: Julia Seidl

**IT'S BEEN THREE YEARS SINCE** Stuart Ververs, Creative Director of Coach, moved to the United States and he is still as taken with the nation as the first time he stepped foot on American soil. "I'm an outsider to America, so I romanticise it. The dream of it pulls me in," says the UK-born designer, who has spent many summer vacations exploring the country, probably more extensively than most natives. And not via private jet or first class as would be customary for most

fashion designers, but by train. Yes, train. Cross country trips to Chicago, Seattle, LA, Memphis and Charleston on the good old Amtrak railway with nothing but the vast countryside speeding by his window have helped him get to the heart of the land, a necessary act for the designer of a brand whose national pride goes back over seven decades. Cinema has proven to be another way. "Growing up in Yorkshire, American films felt so exotic and aspirational," says Mr.



Coach Rogue Bag at their FW'16 show.

Ververs. "I still go back to many of those films that I watched back then." He has cited the sweeping landscapes of Terrence Malick films as "perennial references" and counts *Working Girl* as an all-time favourite. Two very different types of film indeed, but both are very much ingrained in American culture, much the same as Coach has worked itself into the very fibers of American fashion.

In the 75 years since the brand was founded in a New York City

loft by six leatherworkers in 1941, Coach has retained its footings in the often fickle industry. If anything, it's upped its cool factor in the last few seasons, thanks in large part to Mr. Ververs and his focus on a fresh core client base. "New codes of luxury are being defined by the next generation," says the designer. "They want something that reflects their lives and personalities but still has the fantasy of fashion." The "they" he is referring to? The cool girl. The death of

the “it” bag has given way to the birth of the “it” girl and the front row of Coach’s Fall 2016 runway was loaded with pretty young things that are street style photographer magnets - Chloë Moretz (the face of their ad campaign), Dree Hemingway, Emma Roberts and Ciara, to name a few. These stars, like Coach’s target customer, are the kind of girls you’d see walking down the street and want to chase after (or silently stalk on Instagram) to find out where they bought their shoes, their dress, their bag, their everything. That’s part of the motivation behind Coach’s Shop the Runway feature on their website. It allows customers to purchase a bag moments after it makes its debut on the catwalk. For a millennial audience, instant gratification mixed with first dibs is paramount but it’s just one part of Mr. Vevers’ new direction. “Offering a few pieces for sale after the show is a fun extra, rather than a new business strategy,” says Mr. Vevers. “The anticipation of waiting for a runway piece to arrive in stores can be exciting and part of the magic of fashion, at least for me.”

For Coach, the runway itself is a relatively new avenue, spearheaded by Mr. Vevers and part of his new vision for the brand (a pre-fall collection is also a new addition). September 2015 marked their first full-blown runway show under the newly minted label Coach 1941. High-end leather goods had always been their staple but with Coach 1941, Mr. Vevers showed a more luxurious side to the heritage brand, resulting in a genre that Coach CEO Victor Luis has called “American luxury”. For Fall 2016 that meant cuddly shearling, layers of sheepskin and fur-lined high-top sneakers, as well as the brand’s new Rogue bag. Available in bell-and-whistle form (think tea rose appliques or enveloped in rivets), the Rogue also comes in a more basic model



was hired as creative director in 1961, led Coach into women’s fashion and a new era. Brighter colours, innovative hardware (including the turn-lock) and now iconic styles like the Saddle and the Bucket Bag were takeaways of her tenure, which also included the American Handbag Designer of the Year award in 1968. Under Reed Krakoff, who was named creative director in 1997, Coach exploded on the international stage thanks in part to the signature “C” logo, which was inspired by materials from the brand’s archives.

When Mr. Vevers arrived on the scene in 2013, vintage Coach provided inspiration for his first season. “I had a good rummage in the archive and then walked away,” says the designer. “I did incorporate some Coach design signatures into the first collection. The turn-lock, handtag and horse and carriage. But I wanted them to sit within a new context. I deliberately didn’t limit myself to Coach’s heritage. I wanted to trust my instinct on how Coach could be relevant today. The heritage is there, but it’s in the past.”

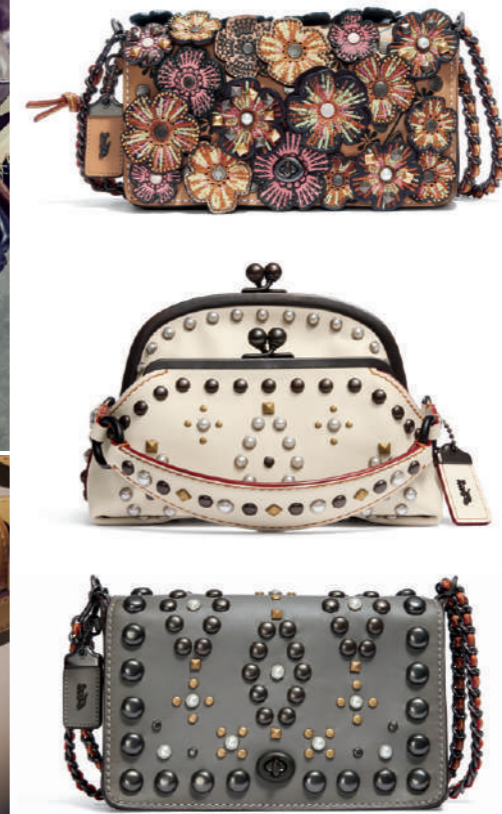
Even before he came on board as creative director, Mr. Vevers felt that America’s premier leather goods brand had already played a role in his own design past. “Every brand I’ve worked with has had Coach pieces in its inspirational archive,” says the designer who, after studying fashion design at the University of Westminster, got his start in the business with Calvin Klein in New York. He was headhunted by Bottega Veneta where he breathed new life into the Italian luxury purveyor’s interwoven leather, after which was followed by time in the accessories departments at Givenchy and Louis Vuitton. Next came



**Clockwise from top right:** Coach 75th anniversary ad campaign, 2016; models walk the runway at Coach 1941 FW16 show; Coach ad campaigns from the 1960s to 1980s

where what stands out is the material - glovetanned leather, the same material that made Coach a household name.

Miles Cahn, who joined Coach in 1946 with his wife Lillian, can be credited with using this glovetanned cowhide leather for the first time in the 1950s. A thicker yet more flexible cowhide that until then had mainly been used in making baseball gloves, it went on to become the house’s signature leather. Sportswear designer Bonnie Cashin, who



the creative director position at Mulberry in 2004. Fashion fans would agree that the magic Mr. Vevers wove at Mulberry led to some of the period’s most talked about bags (his work on the Bayswater tote is the stuff handbag legends are made of) and earned him the Accessory Designer of the Year at the 2006 British Fashion Awards. 2007 saw the designer at Spanish leather house Loewe where he redesigned their Amazona bag to critical acclaim before he found a new home in New York City at Coach’s new High Line offices. In the three years since his arrival, Mr. Vevers has managed to not only create an escalating buzz around Coach not seen since the days of the logo-happy handbag, but he’s also been able to guide customers to come to Coach for more than just a jacket, handbag or pair of shoes. It’s grown into a full-fledged ready to wear line for both women and men but one that is not so luxurious that it isn’t attainable. “There’s something honest about Coach, in that you want it and you can have it, as opposed to wanting it because it is out of reach,” says Mr. Vevers. “I find that refreshing. As a designer it has been liberating.” Leave it to America to give a man his freedom. ☺

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**Top:** A look from Coach 1941 FW16 collection; inside Coach’s archives; bags from Coach 1941 FW16 collection



**Left:** The craftsmanship behind a Coach handbag; **Right:** footwear from Coach 1941 FW16 collection