

The rise of COT COUTURE

Hand-sewn dresses for toddlers and dry-clean-only bibs: bonkers or what all the hip babies are wearing? Olivia Gordon reports

AT THE BABY SHOW IN LONDON IN FEBRUARY, one particular item was attracting a lot of attention: a Gucci changing bag. Displayed in prime position at the stall of designer babywear shop Childsplay, pregnant women stopped to gaze at it and ask: 'How much?' The sales assistant's straight-faced answer? '£565.'

Most of the mothers backed away. 'I wouldn't spend more than £40 on a changing bag,' muttered one. 'It'll only get chucked on the floor.'

The Gucci bag may be beyond most people's means, but Armani changing bags, at £193, were flying off the shelves at the same stall – as were Juicy Couture baby hoodies (£65) and Ralph Lauren babygrows (£49).

'In the last year, the demand for baby designer clothing has gone crazy – it seems to be a recession-proof industry,' the sales assistant told me. Coleen Rooney is a regular at Childsplay, but most of the customers are ordinary mums.

The child fashion trend has been building for years, filtering down from the A-listers. Suri Cruise, now six, has been the trailblazer. When *US Weekly* questioned Tom Cruise about his daughter's stylishness in December, his breezy reply implied that – like any adult starlet – she has effortless chic: 'She was just born that way.'

Celebrity culture and media exposure from birth mean that today's toddlers and tweens are often as fashion-savvy and self-conscious as most thirtysomethings were as teenagers. *US* magazine recently ran a feature on Maddox Jolie-Pitt, Suri Cruise and Coco Arquette all wearing the same coat, under the headline: *Red Carpet: Who Wore It Best?* And when they do become teenagers, there's no stopping the little fashion mavens. At the age of 11, Tavi Gevinson, now 16, became one of fashion's foremost bloggers; by 13, she was a front-row regular at New York Fashion Week.

But in 2012, we're seeing the trend go further still: this is the year of the baby fashionistas. With the current generation of new parents including Rachel Zoe, Victoria Beckham, Elton John and Beyoncé, babies are becoming celebrities in their own right – and therefore must be photo-ready. Rachel Zoe has been said to call her 15-month-old, Skyler, her 'live doll' and he was papped recently in £155 Gucci booties.

A-list pram and highchair brands, like Bugaboo and Stokke, have become elite must-haves – and the same

Celebrity stylist Rachel Zoe with her 'live doll', son Skyler



is happening with clothes, as design-houses wake up to baby fashion: a huge, growing market. In the last three years, we've seen newborn lines launching from the likes of Versace, Gucci and Gaultier. Designer spin-offs for high-street brand Gap from Diane von Furstenberg and Stella McCartney have had the same soar-off-the-rails popularity as their adult counterparts. In March, following hot on the heels of Selfridges, high-end London department store Liberty opened its first babywear section, with carefully chosen brands, like Paul Smith, »

Chloé and Marc Jacobs, while Stella McCartney Kids recently opened its first standalone boutique within one of her London stores.

With the growth in the UK of baby showers, mama-and-me shopping has never been so commercial. So it's no surprise we're even starting to see baby fashion shows and couture, as well as prêt-à-porter. The coolest model of this year's Paris Fashion Week was three-year-old Hudson Kroenig, son of male model Brad Kroenig, who sauntered down Chanel's catwalk with a classic quilted handbag, and has also modelled for Fendi. And for the world's most pampered baby princes and princesses, Christian Dior's Paris ateliers make bespoke couture baby clothes to order.

Baby fashion follows the same trends as adult fashion, with pastels, florals and acid brights all totally this season. And some of the language used to sell designer babywear does seem strikingly adult: Liberty introduces Chloé's baby-girl dresses: 'Daydreaming and slender-figured, the little Chloé girl embodies elegance and softness.'

Has the fashion world finally gone gaga? Most mothers enjoy dressing their babies up, and will happily spend an extra £10 at the supermarket stocking up on unnecessary, but cute, babygrows – especially at a time when they don't always feel great about how their own clothes fit. But when most of us can't afford to spend a casual £100 on an impulse buy for our own wardrobe, why are some willing to part with twice that on designer labels that are going to be outgrown within weeks and covered in sick and poo almost immediately?

Could be that if you feel guilty about spending too much on yourself, when it comes to our babies – or those of friends – it's a compact way to splash out? Just as it's widely believed to be worth paying more for a Stokke highchair, people are more than willing to spend on truly beautiful baby clothes. The items are small, and, although pricey, they're significantly more affordable than adult-sized designer items. Then there's the fact that a well-dressed baby attracts complimentary attention, which gives any stressed-out new mother a glow of pride. As Helen, 31, says: 'All the effort I once put into dressing myself now goes into dressing my baby.'

'During challenging economic climates, baby and children's brands often perform well,' says Harvey Nichols' childrenswear buyer, Lulu Rayne. 'This is largely because we still enjoy the feel-good factor of spending, but would prefer not to spend on ourselves. And what could make us happier than seeing our little ones in an adorable new outfit?'

Fashion blogger Johanna Payton (fashiondetective.co.uk) says having a baby in designer labels is, for some, a statement about how important they are. 'At the last two London Fashion Weeks, I've noticed a rise in babies being brought along by fashionista mummies. Most have ridiculously OTT baby designer ensembles on. Designer clothes for kids taps into a parent's belief that a label lets them into some privileged section of society.'



CLOCKWISE, FROM FAR LEFT: Victoria Beckham, with daughter Harper Seven wearing Chloé; David Furnish and Elton John, with their son, Zachary; Brad Pitt, with daughter Vivienne; Suri Cruise is a fashion icon in the making



We're not just talking about the super-rich, though. At Westfield shopping centre's Bébé Bisou store, mums who wouldn't dream of spending that much on themselves browse expensive baby clothing and shoes from Ralph Lauren, Fendi and Kenzo.

And for those who see blingy labels as trashy, there's a different kind of middle-class, ultra-tasteful baby fashion that's almost as expensive, and just as far from chain-store clichés. Scandinavian brands, like Duns Sweden and Ej Sikke Lej, with their imaginative prints, are among the coolest baby labels in the world. And then there are the hip home-grown brands, like Green Baby and Caramel Baby & Child. All of these subtly declare that the wearer is a well-brought-up tiny individual.

Fashion PR and mother Fran Walker, from Peterborough, says she can't seem to help herself. 'I dress my 18-month-old son, Fraser, in Armani, D&G, and Evisu' she says. 'I'm the same myself, though, I love to wear designer.' Fran admits her spending can be embarrassing: 'I once spent £50 for three Juicy Couture dummies, which was mental. Especially as I lost two of them.' But she affords her designer babywear by buying most of it brand new at big discounts on eBay, and re-selling what Fraser outgrows back on the site.

'I find baby bling obscenely wasteful,' says 38-year-old mother-of-two Sophie, from London. 'It's one thing to buy your baby quality, well-designed stuff if you can afford it. But over £100 for a tacky-looking babygrow with a big logo on? That's grotesque.'

Over at Harvey Nichols' childrenswear concession, Step2wo, the prices are among the highest in town. Must-have items include an ultra-bling Swarovski crystal Versace bottle holder (£315), a Fendi babygrow for a six-month-old (£146) and a Baby Dior hat (£68.50), while a hand-sewn Italian Pamilla dress for a two-year-old costs £525.

To some, it may well be obscene, but as Skyler, Shiloh and co grow up, it looks set to only get bigger. ■

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