

L'avenue Of Windows: A View Of Displays In Gay Paris



*Caroline Wooden, Senior Design Manager (POS and Windows) at Marks & Spencer, headed for Paris to give us her views on the creativity and standards of the Fashion Capital's store windows.*

Since window shopping is a great passion of mine and Paris, one of my favourite cities, I was delighted to put the two together and nip over the channel, to see what was going on in the way of displays. I find designing and implementing window campaigns, that are commercial yet aesthetic, are practical for installation and in budget, a big challenge at M&S and I wanted to see how Paris measured up.

My starting point was Boulevard Hausmann with its department stores. An unmistakably large, photographic banner at the front of Galeries Lafayette heralded their campaign for the summer; 'Travellers chic.' Each window comprised a set of 3, lightbox-mounted images, depicting tales from far away places. Phrases, in simple white text, out of black, added the narrative. The images, for the most part, were exotic and intriguing but the sum-of-parts did not achieve the most eye-catching of window schemes. Certainly not fulfilling their promise of a 'Passport to Adventure'!



Next door, at Printemps, things were less campaign-driven. A series of sponsored windows, ranging from Chanel couture, to Nespresso coffee. Needless to say they didn't sit happily together but were absolutely fine in their own merit. Along Rue de Sevres, Bon Marche was celebrating 60 years of The Cannes Film Festival. Silhouettes of paparazzi, camera flashes and red rope barriers filled the windows. But not one frock in sight! What a missed opportunity?

Walking down the Rue de Rivoli, I was surprised to see that the international chains were actually putting on a better show than the big French brands. They were more impressive, in terms of quality and finish, but then nothing I hadn't seen previously in London. The French chains were in need of some 'TLC' and a hefty injection of creativity. There was more to see along Rue St-Honoré and the warren of little streets that make up The Marais. The summer windows at BHV picked up the trend for coloured mannequins; theirs, in bright shades of blues, standing amidst sand and dozens of snow globes. On closer inspection, each globe contained a miniature of the window itself, mannequins and all. A nice little detail.

After the swarms of butterflies in windows, over the last couple of years, I thought I would never want to see one again but Kenzo's oversized butterfly collection was eye-catching and fun. Enlarged paper cut-outs, pinned to brown paper, stood out from the crowd. Illustration cropped up on more than a few occasions, in various styles. A playful background in Celio, 1920's stylised flapper girls in Lancel and occasionally, a more painterly approach. All working well to tell their own story.



At the couture-end of the market, there was hardly a hair out of the place. Along the Rue de Montaigne, the 'uber'-brands oozed luxury and glamour with their no-expense-spared approach to window display. Mirror and metallics were the order of the day; highly reflective panels in Dior, intricate pattern, etched into matt, silver backgrounds, in Valentino and over-printed mirror, with geometric designs, in Emanuel Ungaro. In contrast to this, strong colour-themes appeared in John Galliano and Yves Saint Laurent. Galliano's mannequins were painted exactly the same tone as the dresses they wore, rendering them more 'sculpture' than 'clothes horse'. Tall stacks of bright coloured chairs became an architectural structure, resembling the leaning Tower of Pisa, at Yves Saint Laurent. Coordinating the chairs with the walls and floors created a strong presence, alongside their more subdued competitors.



These windows delivered everything one would expect from the big players. The attention to detail was second to none. All very slick, stylish and oh, so serious!



Doing the difficult job of trying to bridge the gap, between Haute Couture and High Street, is the Champs Elysees. It still has its fair share of fast food restaurants and multiplex cinemas but with the arrival of, especially, Cartier and Louis Vuitton, things have turned decidedly up-market. Even the car showrooms came complete with a café and a lifestyle store. The best of these was the Peugeot showroom with big bold graphics running from the widows, through to in-store, as well as onto leaflets. Their message about 'going green' was certainly being shouted, loud and clear. The jewel in the crown though, had to be the Louis Vuitton store. Heralded as a "monument to modern luxury", this 4-storey store celebrates the brands heritage, as well as, truly bringing it bang-up-to-date, offering a most fantastic retail experience; not to be missed.

I find window shopping great fun and Paris, a beautiful city, especially in spring time. But, when it comes to window displays, London's really do have an edge over theirs. Even though our High Streets have more chains, the standards are very high. And when it comes to department stores, Liberty, Harrods, Selfridges and Harvey Nichols are truly world leaders and very hard to beat in any country. Our smaller independents are always original and highly creative. But truly, it seems to me, to be in the installation and maintenance (even cleanliness) of our windows that make London's look more professional. I have since learned that there are practically no secondary education courses available in Display or Visual Merchandising in Paris and in-store training would appear to be somewhat weak.

My trip to Paris has also made me appreciate the training and support, offered to our display teams, here at Marks & Spencer. It hadn't occurred to me how crucial tools, like a 'look book', can be in showing the principle foundations of visual display and product placement. Or how standards are kept consistent with the help of training for all new staff, as well as, intensive training days in new stores. I can design window campaigns, confident that an informed, caring team will install them with pride and professionalism. Next time you are window shopping, check out the detail (and hopefully not the dust!).