

# **Stop the Fashion System: The Visual Merchandising Story of Moschino from Window to Web**

**Melissa Noucas**

## **Abstract**

In the fashion industry, the phrase “avant-garde” has become synonymous with the designer Franco Moschino and his brand. This paper will analyze this brand and its avant-garde approach to visual merchandising, both in its stores and online.

## **The Man behind Moschino**

In the fashion industry, the phrase “avant-garde” has become synonymous with the designer Franco Moschino and his brand. Founded in Milan in 1983 by Franco, Moschino is an eclectic, fun and fashion-forward brand (Moschino.com). Moschino liked to challenge the fashion world and what it stood for in the 80’s and early 90’s, and his design team continues to keep his visions alive today. He ran shocking advertisements and constructed window displays that read “Stop the Fashion System,” and refused to show on the runway in 1991 (Moschino.com).

In Moschino’s mind, the “Fashion System” consisted of overly haughty, exceedingly fashion-obsessed people who took fashion too seriously. He loved fashion, but viewed both the industry and designing lightly, as creative outlets. He enjoyed putting out controversial designs that mocked more conservative designers, and was even sued for this reason by Chanel (Moschino: Label Overview). Moschino’s designs were never boring -- they were always fresh and often pushed the envelope. From his innovative designs to his unprecedented antics, it’s no wonder fashion-forward minds adore his lines.

## **His Company: Past and Present**

Since its inception, Moschino has continued to put out high fashion, yet saleable, designs year after year. From 1983 to present, the company has known how to maintain a strong brand image through visual merchandising. They also know what their customers expect, and how to move into the lucrative bridge and contemporary markets without changing their overall high-end designer brand perception.

As of 2009, There are a total of three lines under the Moschino brand name: *Moschino* (also known as Signature), *Love Moschino* (originally Moschino Jeans) and *Moschino*

*Cheap and Chic* (Moschino.com). Since the additions of the latter two lines in 1986 and 1988 respectively, the company's target market has expanded, and the Moschino name is now a part of the Designer Ready-to-Wear, Bridge, and Contemporary retail categories. The Cheap and Chic line is "priced 30 percent below Signature ... *Love [Moschino]* is priced 30 percent below *Cheap and Chic*" (Edelson). The target market for the Moschino lines is fashionable men and women with a high discretionary income. In other words, those who shop at Moschino have enough money to spend at least \$1,000 on a dress.

The first Moschino boutique was opened in Italy in 1989 -- three years after the company's launch. The first Cheap and Chic boutique opened in Italy in 1990. Moschino uses its boutiques as outlets for expressing its unique brand image. All Moschino designs -- apparel, accessories, furniture, and window displays -- have a very distinct playful and surreal feeling to them. As of 2007, Moschino boasts 67 boutiques as well as over 800 points of sale worldwide (Zargani, "Moschino Forges").

It wasn't until early 2009 that the online boutique and website were launched (Moschino.com). The opening of the virtual store was an important decision for Moschino especially during the current economic recession. In the past few years, online sales, although somewhat affected by the economy, have exponentially grown. (Mintel) The online store also acts as another outlet for Moschino to communicate the company's desired brand image to their customers and other shoppers who may not live near a Moschino store.

The majority of the company is currently owned by Italian based Aeffe S.p.a., and another large portion is controlled by an Italian holding company, Sportswear International (Zargani, "Moschino Rebrands"). After Franco Moschino's death in 1994, his colleague and friend Rossella Jardini assumed the role of Creative Director (Moschino.com). The brand has since undergone some revamping and expanding, but has always been true to Franco's original whimsical aesthetic.

### **Visual Merchandising: Window Whimsy**

The outstanding visual merchandising techniques of Moschino, both in-store and online, has greatly benefited each of the Moschino lines. "Visual merchandising is an art -- integrating a pallet of color, signage, mannequins, fixtures, lighting, ambiance, and merchandise" (Poloian). Visual merchandising, more specifically window displays, has simultaneously become something Moschino is known for as well as one of their most valuable assets.

Window displays are used in retail as tools to communicate the company or store's image; products they are carrying; any fashion trends they are following; and promotions that are going on within the store -- all within the few seconds that it takes a consumer to walk up to and past the storefront (Sankar, Block, and Chandran). A successfully merchandised window will generate enough interest for the consumer to enter the store, and even better, make a purchase. To encourage foot traffic and sales, stores put their

best and most relevant products in the window display. Sankar et al. note that “consumers use various ambient (e.g. lighting), design (e.g. architecture) and social (e.g. sales personnel) elements of a store's environment as inferential cues about the its image.” (279) “Window shopping,” or casually browsing and looking at merchandise in store windows, has become a popular pastime among city shoppers and mall-goers alike. The window displays help consumers stay in the know; decide whether they should bother entering the store; and, ultimately, help them make “personally relevant purchases” (Sankar et al. 279).

Sankar, Block, and Chandran conducted interviews among a group of about 130 young, urban university students and concluded that store image and fit were the most popular reasons for store entry after viewing a window display. Close behind were store promotions, fashion items and trends (Sankar, Block, and Chandran 283). Since window designs have only seconds to draw in potential customers, they need to be eye-catching and also need to strongly communicate the brand image of the company that they represent. Moschino has used their brick and mortar and virtual stores as vehicles to communicate their strong brand image through visual merchandising. In their displays, Moschino focuses heavily on store image, with a slight emphasis on fashion products and an occasional mention of a promotion. Most displays are conceptual installations -- they require some thought and are usually visual and conceptual double entendres. Many designers have noticed the successful visual merchandising techniques used by Moschino and have unsuccessfully attempted to replicate their style. These companies simply cannot compete as Moschino has been doing it for years, and very successfully.

The Moschino brand has been able to relay its image to potential customers and passersby through their intricate and interesting display windows since the launch of the first boutique. From early displays such as “Stop the Fashion System,” and “Ceci n’est pas une boutique,” to more contemporary ones like “Mouschino,” and “My Better Half”, a strongly quirky and creatively whimsical brand image has developed. Each window display is unique and eye-catching, but still maintains the overall brand story of Moschino. It is hard to walk down the sidewalk, whether in New York or Milan, and not be drawn to the Moschino displays.

Franco Moschino was the design mind behind each of the displays until 1993. He drew a lot of his inspiration from Surrealist and Dadaist artists, especially Spanish born artist Salvador Dali (Martin). Breton defined Surrealism as “thought expressed in the absence of any control exerted by reason, and outside all moral and aesthetic considerations” (Janson 993). The underlying ideas of many Moschino window displays were dreamlike, something that perhaps came from his creative subconscious. In one of his first window displays, Franco coined the phrase “Stop the fashion system”. The setting featured the slogan next to a well dressed vampire-woman sitting in a room that is perceived to be luxurious with a giant red “X” over the entire scene. He strongly believed that everyone took fashion too seriously, and that it was really something to enjoy. Although this window may have angered some, it was considered a refreshing take on fashion to others.

After the controversies of his early window displays, the firm realized that much of their

success drew upon their ability to communicate and sell their brand through this multi-medium technique. The windows create an entertaining atmosphere before the customer even steps foot in the store. This allows the customer to clearly define the brand in his or her own terms while experiencing a shopping trip in the world of Moschino. Even today, these windows, means of communication to potential customers and passersby, all represent Franco Moschino's original aesthetic: humor, surrealism, and fun. These windows are *not* clothes thrown on lifeless mannequins. They *are* visually pleasing scenarios that draw potential customers in and could easily be taken from a modern surrealist painting.

Since the death of Franco Moschino in 1994, some of the brand's strongest and most lauded windows have been designed by Jo Ann Tan, Piero Capobianco, and Rosella Jardini and her design team ("Moschino: Whimsy"). In April 2008 at the Via Sant'Andrea store, the Moschino design team put out a window entitled "My Better Half". This ingenious display used mirror reflections to create the illusion of space. Half of a wooden desk, a matching chair, and a red lamp sit to the left and reflect upon the attached wall-high mirror. On the other side of the room, half of a striped couch and half of a backwards mannequin in Moschino are attached and reflected against another wall-high mirror. The objects stand out from the gray room, but it takes a few seconds for the eyes to realize what they are looking at -- a room full of halves! This creative take on a display window focused on the garment by creating a minimalist space that was also telling of the humor and creativity of the brand. The window could have easily been done with a desk, chair, couch, etc., but by going that extra step, the design became that much more interesting, and that much more "Moschino".

One of the more humorous window dressings, "Mouschino" was done in February 2008 at the Via Sant'Andrea store. The window featured a red curtained runway with the designer "Mouschino's" name and little faux mice strutting the designs down the catwalk. The onlookers, or other mice, sit attentively in golden life size chairs. Animals are a common find in Moschino displays. The ability that the brand has to poke fun at itself and the fashion industry is unprecedented.

The "Soft Construction without Boiled Beans" window display was made for the Milan furniture fair in April of 2009. The melting room was a clever interpretation of the Dali painting, "Soft Construction with Boiled Beans," which depicts gnarled distorted bodies in a cloud and desert setting (Martin). Moschino's version came complete with a melting lamp, chair, windows, and a flowing black and white Moschino dress (Moschino.com). Pictures hanging on the wall of the liquid-like room include various whimsical images, most noticeably Moschino's commonly used Surrealist-inspired clouds. Although the window only showed one dress from that season's line, it conveyed Moschino's overall design aesthetic and encouraged passersby to enter to see what else was in store. The Moschino team came up with an ingenious way to make the store intriguing to shoppers without plastering "SALE!" everywhere.

## **Visual Merchandising: Virtual Reality**

Despite the recession, online shopping remains popular, especially in households whose income is \$100K or more a year (Mintel). A survey conducted in December 2008 on a little more than 18,000 participants by the Mintel Group shows that 75% of these high income households made online purchases within the previous 12 months, up from 65% in 2006. Not far behind were the \$50k - \$74.9 and \$75K - \$99.9K brackets with 59% and 65% respectively, also up from the 2006 survey. Another important find is that roughly three-quarters of everyone surveyed use the internet “to buy goods or services” (Mintel). Moschino’s target market for each of the three lines falls within the range of the mentioned income bracket.

Their online boutique, launched in 2009, has become a virtual extension of the in-store visual merchandising. The online shop is similarly unique as the company has transferred their successful merchandising brand strategy from window to web. Upon landing on the site, the viewer sees a plethora of symbols -- peace signs, ducks, the yin and yang, safety pins, and more. The site is set up like a board game, “Gioco Dell’Occa,” complete with their duck mascot as a pawn, and symbols that represent the Moschino brand as steps on the board. By making the site a game, the company has kept the atmosphere light-hearted, fun, and truly in line with the aesthetic of the actual stores.

The part of the site dedicated to online shopping is titled “Ceci n’est pas une boutique,” meaning “this is not a boutique,” in French; an old ad campaign slogan of Franco Moschino (Moschino.com). The recurring themes of clouds and hearts also make their way onto the site. The design team was able to keep the website consistent with the overall brand image without the help of physical atmospherics -- something that not all companies are successful doing. Through usage of symbols and slogans popularly associated with the Moschino brand, the site’s designers were able to make it act as an interactive display of the brand’s aesthetic and story. The website is very easy to navigate and fun to shop. In the past few months, the virtual boutique has become a new outlet of communication for their brand image with the ability to reach more than just a passerby.

## **Conclusion**

Moschino has become very aware of the added brand value that they have developed through their merchandising techniques. When the consumer views the fun, surrealistic, and slightly Dadaist displays at any of the boutiques, they are given the ability to understand the slightly strange yet well-crafted brand that Moschino has developed. The displays entice the customer to go inside and explore. The brand image is communicated to the consumer in a visually loud manner, and thus the point is taken. By viewing the window displays and online boutique, the consumer understands that the brand they are purchasing is something individual and unique. Through strong, loud, and aesthetically appealing visual merchandising, Moschino has created a highly recognizable brand image that consumers understand and to which they are highly responsive.

## Works Cited

- Edelson, Sharon. "Moschino Opens Flagship in Meatpacking District." *WWD: Women's Wear Daily* 196.47 (2008): 12. *Business Source Premier*. Web. 16 August 2009.
- Janson, H. W., Penelope J. E. Davies, and et.al. *Janson's History of Art: The Western Tradition*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007. Print.
- Martin, J.J. "Milan Furniture Fair | Window Design." [Weblog Post.] *The Moment: New York Times Fashion Magazine*. New York Times. 27 April 2009. Web. 11 August 2009.
- Mintel Group. "Online Shopping". May 2009. *Mintel Reports*. Web. 11 August 2009.
- "MOSCHINO". *Moschino.com*. Web. 24 July 2009.
- "Moschino: Label Overview." *Nymag.com*. New York Magazine, n.d. Web. 11 August 2009.
- "Moschino: Whimsy greets high fashion." *Chain Store Age*, 1 Mar. 1997. *ABI/INFORM Global*. Web. 15 July 2009.
- Poloian, Linda Gamans. *Retailing Principles: A Global Outlook*. New York: Fairchild Publications, Inc., 2003. Print.
- Sen, Sankar, Lauren G. Block, and Sucharita Chandran. "Window Displays and Consumer Shopping Decisions." *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 9.5 (2002): 277-90. *Science Direct*. Web. 23 July 2009.
- Zargani, Luisa. "Moschino Rebrands for Contemporary." *WWD: Women's Wear Daily* 194.114 (2007): 8. *Business Source Premier*. Web. 24 June 2009.
- Zargani, Luisa. "Moschino Forges Ahead, Revisits Past." *WWD: Women's Wear Daily* 193.66 (2007): 12. *Business Source Premier*. Web. 24 July 2009.