



DESIGNER ULLA JOHNSON'S DREAMY INSTAGRAM FEED REVEALS AS MUCH ABOUT HER LIFESTYLE AS HER FASHIONS.

You Must Remember This

Fashion once occupied boutique windows and mail-order catalogues. In this digital age, we can see desirable objects anytime, anywhere.

By Olivia Stren

It was springtime in Paris. Horse-chestnut and almond trees were in white, fluffy bloom, and children were floating toy sailboats across the Jardin du Luxembourg's Grand Bassin. I was about 12 years old, and I was in giddy, heart-fluttering love—with a bag. My mom and I were visiting my aunt, and the three of us were strolling along the Rue du Four in the city's 6th arrondissement. Perched in the vitrine of a small shop was a bucket bag, embroidered in a folkloric happy-coloured pattern. (It was the late '80s, when artisanal hippiedom was making a comeback and patchouli-scented stores like Toronto's Inti Crafts were a teenager's fashion mecca.) As soon as I laid eyes on this marvel, I mentioned to my mom that I liked it, trying to sound casual. She liked the bag, too, she replied, and then we all walked past it. I knew that if I didn't take immediate action, someone else would be with my bag. I couldn't sleep that night. I also felt ashamed

of the intensity of my longing. I summoned the courage to admit my feelings to my mom, who indulged me and bought the bag. I wore it to school until the straps frayed.

This, it turned out, was how I always liked to shop—not for necessity but for love—wandering around searching for the *coup de foudre*. But now, in this age of Instagram, I tend to fall in love online and spend weeks in anticipatory excitement, fantasizing about life with objects that have seduced me from the screen of my iPhone. If I feel temporarily altered and uplifted, it's because I am. David Sulzer, professor of neurobiology at New York's Columbia University, explains that the prospect of buying something new, associated with an "unexpected reward," excites a surge of feel-good dopamine, the neurotransmitter associated with pleasure and addiction. About your brain on Instagram, Sulzer suggests: "Something like gambling or Instagram is sporadic enough that you don't know when you will be 'rewarded,' so it is well designed to activate the dopamine system and keep you interested, or 'hooked.'" »

It's safe to say that I'm hooked. I have spent a humiliating amount of time scrolling through the Instagram accounts of my fashion crushes (Ulla Johnson, Clare Vivier, Apiece Apart, Jesse Kamm, etc.) and nurturing love affairs with clothes and bags and the fantasy of the life required to accessorize them. With the time I've spent on the Ulla Johnson and Clare Vivier sites alone, I could have enrolled in design school and launched my own fashion line—or at least unloaded the dishwasher. On a recent trip to Los Angeles, I visited Clare Vivier's lovely Silverlake boutique and exclaimed: "Oh, is that Jeanne? Wow, she is beautiful!" I was referring to a handbag. I knew her (as in the bag) by name. I had first met her on Instagram. Like a celebrity, she was more petite in person.

Of course, fashion has always been about fantasy, projection and unrequited love. I used to rely on the J.Crew catalogue for these pathologies. But Instagram is an ever-refreshed daily catalogue, dispatching postcards from the better-lit life you wish you had. Jenna Jacobson, a social media researcher in the faculty of information at the University of Toronto, says: "We're wanting further connectivity. It's not enough to have a catalogue, say, once a month; it's about what's new today. Regular advertising or marketing was about pushing products on a target group of people. But [Instagram and social media] are about cultivating a connection with a certain group of people. It's about saying 'We like the same things.' It's about a lifestyle. You're buying into a lifestyle. We're buying these products or these clothes because that brand understands us; it understands who we are and what we like."

And what—or who—I currently like is Natalia: a destabilizingly lovely Ulla Johnson silk embroidered peasant-style midi-dress. I spotted her on Instagram and shared my feelings with a friend, another Ulla Johnson fan and follower. (Ulla Johnson claims about 59.4 K of us.) "Oh, I love her clothes so much," she said. "She makes me lie—to myself!"

Instagram has made celebrities, or "micro-celebrities," out of smaller-scale designers like Johnson and Vivier (with 71.6 K followers). Part of Instagram's power lies in its ability to foster a sense of intimacy. "There is a perceived closeness that is afforded to us by social media because it affords two-way communication," says Jacobson. "So even if the person doesn't respond to us, we are still able to message them and we feel that there is a personal connection. There's the illusion of publicity and disclosure with social media. People are willing to

share parts of their lives that maybe would have been considered private." We now admire not only the designers' clothes but also their children, homes, dogs, holidays and breakfasts.

About this illusion (delusion?) of intimacy, Johnson herself says it's not all that delusional. "We know much more about designers' points of view and passions and interests than we ever did," she says. "Storytelling has become increasingly important in understanding a brand's ethos, and Instagram has really helped to give that voice." Instagram, says Johnson, has hugely influenced her business. "It was the first time I really had direct access to our clientele. I think that being able to elaborate on both our brand and my lifestyle—family, travel, my home, the personal and poetic moments of our design process—created a whole new understanding of our point of view." It has also, arguably, created fresh ground for commerce.

Instagram, like Pinterest, now has click-to-buy buttons. Like a sort of Tinder for fashion, it allows you to immediately connect with a dress or bag that once might have required some degree of courting. Buy-now sales, however, have been flat, which leads one to wonder if there is more romance in the remote.

But if Instagram provides a new province for profit and fantasy, it also provides fresh opportunities for disappointment. Last fall, after much flirting with Clementine (a floral-printed Ulla Johnson dress), I finally met her in person at a Barneys in New York. I made a beeline for her, as if meeting a lover after a protracted long-distance correspondence. As charming as Clementine was, we were ultimately incompatible.

There is, it turns out, nothing quite like Instagram when it comes to despair. One (non-Instagrammable) day not long ago, when my son and I were both felled by the kind of hideous flu that not even the hardest working filter can make pretty, I scrolled through my Instagram feed in the hope of finding a mood-lifting distraction. I then wondered why I was clearly the only person not holidaying in the French Caribbean with a fedora and a blond child.

The way romantic comedies might have a lot to answer for when it comes to our (unachievable) expectations of love, Instagram now has a lot to answer for when it comes to our (absurd) expectations of what our lives should look like. But this particular brand of Instagram-fuelled inferiority complex is nothing a little love affair can't fix. Spring is just around the corner, the perfect time for a fling, and there is still hope for Natalia. (We have not yet met.) And, oh, the summer I might have with Lune. Or Madi. Or Virginie. Or Clare Vivier's fetching Henri. How happy we might be. Maybe we'll go to Paris. □

