

A Conversation with ...Mark Badgley & James Mischka



Mark Badgley wears Theodore frame style from Sama Eyewear.

Designing DUO

Masters of beads, lace and red carpet glamour, Mark Badgley and James Mischka have brought their fashion aesthetic to a new line of eyewear available from the Los Angeles-based Sama Eyewear. The men, who met while studying at New York's Parsons School of Design in the '80s, found they shared a similar design philosophy about clothes and the way people dress. "We like to keep things simple with lavish accents," the designers note. "One zip and you're glamorous. It's fabulous if you can spend hours getting ready, but a woman should also be able to bring a dress to work and change there for an evening out. Style is about taking the time to have your clothes fitted beautifully and having great outfits ready to go at a moment's notice," they both agree.

Before joining forces in 1988 to create Badgley Mischka, Badgley worked for Donna Karan and Mischka, on the men's collection for WilliWear WilliSmith. "We began our signature line by making dresses for friends to wear to parties," Mischka notes. "We've always been interested in luxury and fantasy clothes. Our creations are to be worn when you want to be noticed. People should have a good time when wearing our clothes." In fact, the company motto is "Clothes for Dinner, Drinking and Dancing." Badgley adds, "Our market is women who want to indulge themselves, who want to look feminine. We stick to our guns on that philosophy. We are not trendy."

The result has been sophisticated, streamlined gowns that have captivated the fashion press and prominent retailers, appearing on the covers of *Vogue* and *Women's Wear Daily*, and in such stores as Bergdorf Goodman, Neiman Marcus, Nordstrom and Saks Fifth Avenue and in a freestanding shop on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills, Calif. Although its clientele includes a younger, more modern couture consumer—Madonna, Catherine Zeta Jones, Jennifer Lopez, Kate Winslet, Sarah Jessica Parker and the First Daughters, Barbara and Jenna Bush, who wore Badgley Mischka gowns to the 2005 Inaugural Ball, women of all ages are numbered among Badgley Mischka customers.

The brand, which has been owned by the Iconic Brand Group, Inc. since October 2004, has since expanded into bridal and evening bags and shoes. A fragrance launches this spring and a daywear bridge collection under the Platinum label as well as a second Barbie doll dressed by the designers are planned.

Also new this year is the Badgley Mischka eyewear collection from Sama. The designers first became acquainted with Sheila Vance, Sama founder and designer, when they were asked to create her wedding dress—in chocolate brown—“the first chocolate brown wedding gown we had ever done,” the men note. “What we love about Sheila and the reason we selected her to design our eyewear is she loves embellishment,” Badgley explains. “We didn’t want a generic line. We wanted a collection designed for us. And we don’t want design stripped down so it is boring. Sheila helped us bring glamour to the eyewear. Our optical collection is personal, reflecting the same attention to detail and couture found in our gowns,” Badgley emphasizes.

The new technology now available makes it possible to do extraordinary detailing with eyewear and still maintain an incredibly light weight, Mischka adds. “Sheila has been able to incorporate motifs from our gowns—prints, real pearls, actual ribbons and bows, even a feather—into the frames.” A men’s eyewear collection, Badgley’s and Mischka’s first venture into male designs as a team, also launches this month. Inspired by vintage cars and sunglass styles worn by Greek shipping tycoon Aristotle Onnasis, the collection is getting very positive responses from both men and women customers, the design team says.

“The most striking advantage of an optical collection is that it makes the brand accessible to those who can’t afford \$6,000 for a couture gown,” Mischka says. “It’s also the most personal of accessories—with the exception of lingerie and that is usually not seen.”

A collection of small frames suitable for reading glasses—inspired by all the Badgley Mischka friends who are turning 40—is also available. “We didn’t want our friends to have to resort to drugstore readers,” the team laughs. Whether its eyewear or gowns, the designers frequently turn to the past for ideas that are then reinterpreted into elegant, modern versions. “We are film freaks,” Mischka notes. We love vintage movies from the ’40s and ’50s and have always been inspired by such glamorous Hollywood actresses as Bette Davis, Lauren Bacall and the Hepburns, both Audrey and Katherine.” The men have also been influenced by great American designers of the past, Geoffrey Beene and Norman Norell, as well as the famed European Houses of Chanel, Balenciaga and Dior. “We do like vintage. But we also want to keep our designs modern,” they emphasize.

As for the future, they realize the pendulum will continue to swing back and forth. “But I don’t think clothes will be as costumey as they have been in the past and I don’t think grunge will come back,” Mischka notes. “I believe women want individuality and want to look beautiful. That won’t change.”