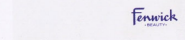


DAVID DOWNTON

DAVID DOWNTON IS ONE OF TODAY'S MOST RECOGNIZABLE FASHION ILLUSTRATORS. SINCE A CAREER-DEFINING COMMISSION SENT HIM TO THE PARIS FASHION SHOWS, HE HAS CARVED OUT A NICHE WORKING WITH SOME OF THE WORLD'S LEADING CLOTHES DESIGNERS AND CELEBRITIES. HIS PASSION FOR PORTRAITURE HAS SEEN HIM BUILD A COLLECTION OF PERSONAL PORTRAITS OF FASHION ICONS SUCH AS MARIE HELVIN AND ERIN O'CONNOR. HIS WORK REGULARLY APPEARS IN MAGAZINES, ADVERTISING CAMPAIGNS, BOOKS AND GALLERY SHOWS. HIS NEW MAGAZINE FOUR QUOI PAS? IS DUE TO LAUNCH IN SUMMER 2007.



5 **Book Illustration**  
2004  
Fornick Bond Street

6 **Shirt**  
1999  
Personal work

**Varoom:** Your work over the past ten years has seen you become one of the leading fashion illustrators. Where did it begin?

David Downton: I left Wolverhampton Art College in 1981, having barely scraped a 2.2 in Graphics and Illustration. A combination of petulance (I fumed for the entire three years about not getting in to St. Martin's) and less than inspiring teaching meant that any confidence I may have had drained away. After various diversionary tactics, I became a freelance illustrator in 1984, moving to Brighton (where I felt that long periods of unemployment would go pretty much unnoticed) and for the next ten years or so I did whatever came my way: romantic fiction, company reports, educational publishing, cookbooks even a sex manual at one point. The cartoonist Chris Burke describes it as 'wagging your tail when the phone rings' which pretty much sums it up. I did get the occasional fashion commission, but I certainly didn't think of myself as a fashion illustrator.

**When did your break come?**

In 1996, How To Spend It Magazine (The FT's Saturday supplement) asked me to go to Paris and draw at the couture shows. I was surprised, I had never even seen a fashion show, but that phone call changed the course of my professional life. Essentially, I started again and for the last ten years most of my time and energy has been spent discovering what it means to be a fashion illustrator.

**What are the influences that shape your work today?**

I count myself very lucky to work with some of the most creative people you can imagine. Fashion illustration is really about absorbing someone else's creativity and reinterpreting it. And when it is successful it represents the best of both of you. I defy anyone, whether they are interested in fashion or not, to fail to be inspired by a Galliano or Gaultier show, or not to be amazed by Lorenzi's extraordinary use of colour.

**Who are the image-makers that inspire you?**

Although, as I say, I would never have called myself a fashion illustrator, I loved the fashion illustrators of the past - René Gruau, Eric Bouche and Antonio. I always saw them as artists first and fashion illustrators second. I think what really appealed to me was the fluidity of their draughtsmanship, the illusion of effortless ease, the power of the reductive line. Line has always fascinated me, we can all draw a line, but some people can make the line funny, some can make it sexy - yet still it's just a line. I also love the work of the great American pin-up artists (Gill Elvgren, Bob Peak and the magazine illustrator Al Parker. Like almost everyone else, I look to Henri Matisse, Giovanni Boldini, David Hockney, Gustav Klimt, Elsworth Kelly, Alex Katz for inspiration. I definitely look to the past, but I'm not attempting to pastiche any particular style. Someone once described my work as 'contemporary nostalgia' - which I think sums up what I'm trying to do.

**Can you talk about the processes and materials that you use in your work?**

The process changes, depending on the job, the circumstances, my mood, the brief - all the usual things. My most successful work involves controlled spontaneity. I draw and redraw, because I have to have everything 'right' before I can start to eliminate and simplify.

I work initially on layout paper or photocopy paper, using 4B or 6B pencils. When I'm happy

with the drawing I put it on the light box and use it as the basis for the finished piece. It's then that I start to think about refining the image, if I leave out a hand or an eye or an ear (as I frequently do) its because I've worked out in my initial drawings exactly where they should be and I am then confident to leave things out. I like to leave what I call a breathing space; the eye will fill in the gaps. My motto is to keep working until it looks effortless. And, of course, I love it when people think I do it in a moment, which implies that I'm much more talented than I am.

**And how do you create images in the demanding environment of a fashion show?**  
If I am drawing in a 'pressured' environment - backstage or at the fittings - I use a fountain pen in a sketchbook. I also take photographs and use both for reference. The drawings, even when they are not 'successful' in their own right, are always essential to the process as they show how I reacted in the moment and what I thought was important. Ideally, I like to produce final pieces at my studio, which is where I feel most relaxed.

**At times your work incorporates elements of collage - using words or patterns. How do these layered illustrations develop?**

I sometimes work with collage, when it feels appropriate to the subject matter. The process remains the same. I start by drawing. I use cut paper (Parlane ideally, although it's scarce now) to form blocks of colour, and then work in ink on an acetate overlay for the line work. It's a pre-digital form of layering and it does have its limitations.

**Your portfolio ranges from celebrity portraits and magazine covers, through to in-store imagery and advertising. Do you recognise a difference in your creative approach to personal work and your commercial clients?**

Absolutely, a commissioned piece of work is only half mine. I do the best I can within the confines of the brief and it is essential that the client is happy. If I can't produce the piece I'd like, then so be it, it is at that point it stops being fun. But I work in a commercial arena and that means accepting that I may not get the final say. For my personal projects, I'm prepared to open a vein. I work and work and rework them, and as the only person that needs to be happy is me, it can be a long process. I hate to admit it, but forests have died in my pursuit of a perfect line!

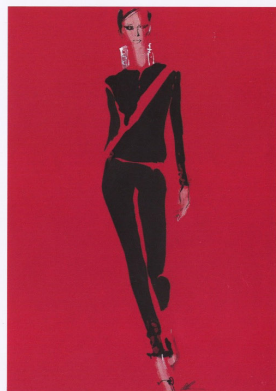
**You are about to launch your own fashion illustration magazine. What made you decide to do this?**

God knows... it's nearly killed me! Today, editorial illustration all too often means plugging a hole left by the copy and a lot of art editors will only use it for a horoscope. It can be extremely frustrating. The magazine is called Four Quoi Pas? A Journal of Fashion Illustration, and is my long-fermenting revenge. It is a magazine about fashion illustration and fashion illustrators past and present. We have some wonderful writers from Vogue, The Times and the New York Times, but they are writing to fit layouts dominated by imagery. I must say they have all been very game about it. And we have no photography other than 'in the service of drawing', which was one of my early rules. I'm very excited about it.

Further reading:  
[www.daviddownton.com](http://www.daviddownton.com)

7 (opposite)  
**Book Illustration**  
2001  
Ele magazine







12



13



14

12 & 13

Stefano Bertoni

2007

Madame magazine, Germany

14

Stefano Bertoni

2000

Personal work

15 (opposite)

Stefano Bertoni

2006

Personal work