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Beyond the Basic T

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Limited-edition T-shirts by graphic designers are going mainstream

By Jamin Warren

FOR ANYONE MYSTIFIED by the fashion world's enduring obsession with the plain white T-shirt, yet another twist on the phenomenon is under way: T-shirts emblazoned with color and bold images made by graphic designers and art-school students.

The shirts, which have moved from the underground club scene to mainstream fashion, take advantage of technologies that have cut production costs and allow runs of a few hundred shirts at a time.

Their appeal has been twofold. They pair well with designer jeans and they tap into the urge of buyers who want to fit into a trend but also wear something unique. Because the shirts' makers churn small batches of multiple designs, wearers aren't likely to run into the same shirt on someone else. Women are pairing the shirts with skirts in addition to jeans, while men are dressing them up with blazers. With prices starting at about \$30, these shirts can often be the cheapest part of a hip outfit.

To promote his latest movie, actor Robin Williams went on MTV wearing a Lemar & Dauley shirt featuring children's icon Mister Rogers. Actress Kate Bosworth recently appeared wearing a gray illustrated T-shirt from Los Angeles boutique Show Pony.

Because part of the appeal is a distinctly individual look, some fashion experts see a danger in the designs becoming too popular. "It's a double-edged sword," says Frank Sinatra (no relation), co-founder of the 26-year-old streetwear brand Stussy. "Tees are a very important product segment, but they run the risk of killing your success. If you get too popular, you lose exclusivity."

The graphic-T trend started through streetwear labels and in the club scene, with early adopters replacing button-down shirts with iconic T-shirts. It then spread further, coming full circle for many 30-somethings who grew up wearing the names of their favorite bands on shirts.

When Brett Holcolomb, a 36-year-old Atlanta real estate investor, isn't suited up



Cottoning On to the Latest Look

Many small T-shirt designers keep overhead down by selling on the Internet. Below is a sampling of some limited-run designs in the \$30 to \$40 price range that are available online and through some stores.

King Stampede

Price: \$40

Available: Through the Boundless NY store or at site www.boundlessny.com

Comment: Only 300 of the "A Todo Vapor" shirts were made by this Brooklyn company. The photo-print design is a nod to Brazilian Tropicalia tunes. "We try to translate the feeling you get from music into visuals," says creative director Pete Leonard.

Staple Design

Price: From \$26

Available: At sites like www.karmaloop.com

Comment: After the passing of "Maxwell Smart" star Don Adams last September, Staple Design created this homage, called "Air Maxwell." Says owner Jeff Ng of the graphic: "Who was the first person to put a shoe to his head?" About 600 of these four-color silk-screen shirts were made.

Experimental Jetset

Price: \$35

Available: At site www.2ktshirts.com

Comment: This Dutch design trio uses text instead of images, in this case playing with the name of the French cinema movement for this "New Wave" silk-screen cotton shirt. Their work is influenced by late modernism, which they call "the folk art of the Netherlands."

Rocksmith by Kilo

Price: \$30-\$35

Available: At sites like www.boundlessny.com and some stores

Comment: Company owner Erik Marino grew up on late 80s/early 90s pop culture and borrows from the cover of Milli Vanilli's sophomore album for this "Running Man" shirt. About 300 were made, using a belt printer to roll patterns across the fabric for an "all over" effect. Netherlands."

for work he wears one of his 60 T-shirts. His current favorite: the Epidemik Coalition line from three local design-school students. These shirts, often paired with his designer jeans, express his creativity, says Mr. Holcomb. "It's style with a point."

THESE GRAPHIC SHIRTS feature images of everything from the work of 1980s graffiti artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, to wordplay to political figures. Some designers mix materials, adding embroidery or vinyl patches to traditional screen-printed designs. And many are printed on blank shirts from makers like American Apparel and Alternative Apparel, which are being cut slimmer and made of lighter-weight cotton, so they resemble more expensive shirts.

Stylists say that anyone can pull off this look with jeans. "Graphic tees give the T-shirt concept a higher, more modern edge," says Stacy London, a stylist and

host of TLC's "What Not To Wear." For men, she advises layering a T-shirt with a blazer. For women and men, Samantha von Sperling, a New York fashion consultant, recommends echoing the colors in the shirt with another item in the outfit such as sneakers or a belt.

Smaller T-shirt brands have grown in popularity in the past few years, according to NPD Group, a market-research firm. T-shirt sales at larger, designer brands such as Donna Karan and Tommy Hilfiter fell more than 12% from March 2003 to this past April. Private labels and brands with limited distribution have grown a combined 20% over the same period. It isn't only providing an opportunity for designers but for artists looking to show their work to a broader audience.

Nima Nabavi, the 28-year-old founder of Digital Gravel, estimates that 15 T-shirt designers contact him each week, hoping he'll carry their lines. The

company, which stocks more than 1,000 designs at its warehouse in City of Commerce, Calif., saw sales double last year to \$5 million.

Threadless, which focuses primarily on unknown artists, lets the public choose the best designs on its Web site. Winning artists get \$2,000, and Threadless controls production and distribution of the shirts. The company expects sales to hit \$20 million this year, up from \$6.2 million last year.

Charlie Trefry, a T-shirt designer and former art director at Burton, a maker of snowboards and outdoor wear, hired designer Josh Smith in 2004 after seeing some of his winning submissions on the Threadless site. It's "a valuable pond to fish in for the hottest new artists looking to get exposure," Mr. Trefry says.

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