

# FASHION

OLIVER GOLDSMITH, Eyewear Designer



The Goldsmiths shot at a London trade show in 1966. Left to right: Andrew "Oliver" Goldsmith, Charles Oliver Goldsmith, and Ray Goldsmith.

Interview by HAIDEE FINLAY-LEVIN

*Designed centuries ago to aid impaired vision, glasses are one of the few accessories that have remained more or less unchanged, always transcending function over form. One designer that was particularly influential in changing the look of glasses was Oliver Goldsmith who, at the age of 18, entered his father's business in 1959. As a third generation successor of an innovative eyewear company, he absorbed himself in redesigning the classic object and brought some revolutionary ideas worn by both stars and royalty, most notably Audrey Hepburn, Peter Sellers, Michael Cain, and Princess Grace of Monaco. As his iconic 1960s designs have come full circle, and the sunglass business continues to thrive through his niece Claire Goldsmith, stylist and eyewear aficionado Haidee Finlay-Levin sits down with Mr Goldsmith to talk shop.*

**Haidee Finlay-Levin:** Oliver, you were the first to see glasses as a fashion accessory, the first to create "sunspecks", the first to make "winter sunglasses" and one of the first to work alongside fashion houses to create one-off pieces for the catwalk, the first to appear in *Vogue* and the first to be endorsed by celebrities and royals. Do you think of yourself as a rebel or as traditional? Is it possible to be both?

**Oliver Goldsmith:** I'm no rebel. I create what I would like men, and women in particular, to wear and feel comfortable wearing all day. I am a traditional rebel! I created a look in the 1960s that was considered outlandish at the time, and look now – those designs are back in fashion and not considered outrageous any more. My job is to make a woman feel beautiful, younger and more glamorous in this age of rapidly changing fashion. She may not be able to change her specs as often as her clothes, so a compromise takes place on the face. A good design can be worn for several years and then kept safely in a drawer, until that person is ready to bring them out again. This can be seen on e-bay, what with the number of "old" Oliver Goldsmith specs and sunglasses changing hands daily.

**Haidee:** Oliver Goldsmith is a family business, founded in 1926 by your grandfather Philip Oliver Goldsmith, a salesman for a small optical firm in London. How important was it for your father and grandfather that the business passed from generation to generation? And how important is it to you?

**Oliver:** Unfortunately, I did not really know my grandfather or how he would have felt about it, as he died at a very young age. With regards to my father, I do believe that he was overjoyed when I asked if I could join the firm. When P. Oliver Goldsmith was formed, every frame was genuinely handmade in London's Poland Street. My father continued this practice and he put me through a very hard training course for three years before he would allow me to design spectacles and sunglasses. I learned all about the production of frames and how the "engine room" worked, directly from him. During that training period, I earned the respect of the staff, which boded well for the future. They knew that I had done the hard work, before being allowed to put pencil to paper. When it was my turn to look to the future, I made a decision not to expect any of my children to follow me into optics. They did what they wanted, rather than what I expected. So instead, I have a professional portrait photographer, a film producer and financial wizard. My daughter does not want the optical business to fade away and would like to keep the "tradition" alive, working more closely with me to achieve this aim. Her maiden name is A. Olivia Goldsmith. Who knows, one of my grandchildren may even become the fifth generation? I will be watching with bated breath from heaven! I am delighted that my niece used my designs to start her "new" business and is keeping the flame alight, as you say, for the sunglass side of the company.

**Haidee:** Oliver Goldsmith was a family run optical business, yet your family often broke from the traditional way of doing things, to move the company forward and into the spotlight.

**Oliver:** In the initial days of P. Oliver Goldsmith Ltd., there was no press sought or granted. My father, Charles Goldsmith, entered the business in 1936. He found the business seconded to the Government during the Second World War as suppliers of spectacles to the armed forces. After the war, he decided that he had to make the name "Oliver Goldsmith" known, if he was to succeed in business.

**Haidee:** Your father's vision was that glasses could become fashionable, especially when worn as sunglasses, which did not exist as we know them now. They were merely a pair of specs with tinted lenses. He was already breaking traditions within the industry. How did he initiate this change?

**Oliver:** He started designing both sunglasses and optical frames and managed to get magazines, such as *Vogue*, to publish photos of his creations on the models of the era. He sold the sunglasses to Harrods, Harvey Nichols, Selfridges and Fortnum and Mason, to name a few. In this way success came to him in the 1950s. The name Oliver Goldsmith became synonymous with sunglasses and eyewear. This was the name that you read associated with them, in the magazines and in the papers. I must say that other opticians frowned upon this unorthodox method of advertising. Their claim was that the decision of what design a "patient" should wear should have been left in the hands of the qualified opticians, and not in those of a service company. At the time it was a very unconventional and new approach – a bit of an uphill struggle. Today, you see all factories advertising their wares, either in paid ads or free editorials. I suppose, as far back as the 1950s, we were the original instigators of this way of advertising.

**Haidee:** What do you see as your personal legacy to the tradition or heritage of the family business?

**Oliver:** I saw great potential in my grandfather's and my father's business. Particularly in my father's designs, from which I created my own image for the 1960s. I started designing in 1963, and I wanted to see my name in the magazines

and newspapers as a great eyewear designer. To a degree I have achieved this. The Oliver Goldsmith tradition can be summed up in three letters: Q E C – Quality, Elegance and Comfort. That was started by my grandfather and is still valid today. I won't allow any spectacle frame branded Oliver Goldsmith to be sold that does not incorporate these letters.

**Haidee:** Oliver Goldsmith has been the eyewear of choice for royals such as Princess Grace of Monaco, Princess Margaret and Princess Diana, to name a few. What has been your company's personal and business relationship to the monarchy?

**Oliver:** My father felt that the best way to get publicity was to make frames and sunglasses for royalty both in the UK and abroad. He wrote Princess Grace of Monaco a letter and asked if he could make her a "wardrobe of glasses", enabling her to change them with different outfits or occasions. She liked this original idea, and so he sent a few designs and colours for her to select from. This was followed up with a visit, by my parents, to the palace in Monaco for an audience with Princess Grace. I still have a letter my mother wrote after the visit. When Princess Grace came to London, my father would always go and see her. Then came Princess Margaret. I don't remember how she became a customer, but I do know that once she was on board, she would not wear anything other than Goldsmith frames. It was kind of spooky though, as she only liked one of my designs and if it broke, we had to repair the frame or supply an identical model.

**Haidee:** What about Princess Diana?

**Oliver:** Princess Diana was a real coup. When it was announced that Diana would go to Australia to see her mother to discuss marrying Prince Charles, my father realised that this would be excellent publicity for us, if she was photographed wearing our sunglasses. He sent her a few pairs to wear in Australia, but with the postal delays, they did not arrive in time. But the good news was that Diana wrote a personal thank-you letter to my father, for the sunglasses that she received and promised to wear them in London to protect her eyes from the press photographers and their flash bulbs. There was not a day that passed that Diana was not in the press, and in most cases wearing her Oliver Goldsmith "sunnies."

**Haidee:** What does rejection of tradition mean to you? What traditions did you maintain and what did you reject both personally and within your work?

**Oliver:** I believe that traditional and modern designs can sit side by side in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which is what I am doing at the moment. It's important for designers to create what the public want, and not dictate that they have to wear this or that. I am delighted that segments of our operation require retro and others modern.

**Haidee:** Because what is traditional and conventional in one generation could become the backswing two generations later. What do you think of the cycle of change that swings from tradition to radical change and back to tradition?

**Oliver:** Fashion goes around in a circle. That's a fact. What is popular today will be history tomorrow and will come back again, when designers look back over history looking for concepts to re-introduce. This will apply to eyewear as well. I am very happy that I am alive to see the re-introduction of my designs from the 1960s. At least these are all my original creations, and I have not needed to seek advice from outside sources, for this authenticity. Since I have kept and will keep for the future, an original sample of each design, there will be history for my future families to delve into, either in my personal storage, or at the V&A where they safely house a collection of our three generations of designs in their archives.

**Haidee:** In eyewear there is a very definitive archetype to what defines a pair of glasses – more so than clothing or even shoes.

**Oliver:** Well, we have to realise that you have two eyes, two ears, a nose, two cheeks and a mouth. The glasses have to fit the face unlike clothing that can be a full dress, strapless, backless or topless. We don't have this vast array of ideas available to us in the optical industry. They make the point: a spectacle frame is an item to hold corrective lenses in front of the eyes.

**Haidee:** Woody Allen said: "I have never been very intellectual. I just have this look." Do people purchase glasses to look smarter, just for appearance, to create a particular illusion character reinforced by tradition?

**Oliver:** For a lot of people, it's great to wear specs as you can hide behind them. In the past you would light a cigarette to give you confidence to walk into a room of strangers. Today, it's the specs that give you that air of confidence. People purchase glasses, as they need the corrective vision. Some will wear outrageous glasses in ultra bold colours and others in conservative shades. You can be noticed or not as you desire. Woody Allen has always worn the same shape so for him to change would probably change his character as well, so better to stick with what works.