

JESSICA BUMPUS

Calvin Klein

The Story Behind the Style



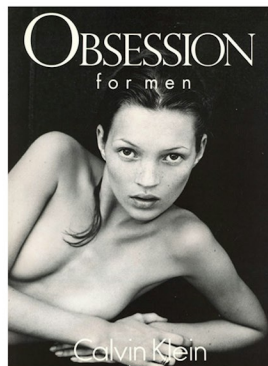
UNOFFICIAL AND UNAUTHORISED



Perhaps it's Kate Moss (in said slip dress) or Brooke Shields – the models (and supermodels) Calvin Klein made famous through provocative but landmark fashion campaigns that, to this day, are referenced on the moodboards of both established and up-and-coming designers. The man was a marketing genius.

Or is it the perfumes – Obsession, Eternity, CK One? The underwear, with that Calvin Klein wording peeking out over waistbands? The designer jeans, which were revolutionary at the time and worn in those landmark campaigns by Brooke Shields?

All of these things are defining features of the American brand which stands alongside the country's greats: Ralph Lauren, Donna Karan, Tommy Hilfiger and Oscar de la Renta. Incidentally, Ralph Lauren came from the same neighbourhood as Klein.



OPPOSITE: In 1981 at Studio 54 in New York City, Calvin Klein and Brooke Shields.

TOP LEFT: Kate Moss in the famous Obsession perfume advert, 1995.

TOP RIGHT: Kate Moss walks at the Calvin Klein spring/summer 1999 show.



BOTTOM LEFT: Jeremy Allen White for Calvin Klein underwear on a billboard in Piccadilly Circus, London, 2024.



BOTTOM RIGHT: With the designer Donna Karan at the 2016 CFDA Fashion Awards, New York.

Maybe it's Carolyn Bessette-Kennedy that comes to mind? The late style icon worked for Klein as a publicist and, as a result, became an ambassador for the brand, coming to define the sleek and stylish aesthetic of the 1990s Klein era. Perhaps it is the more recent chapter of the story – post-Calvin Klein the man. Francisco Costa and Italo Zucchelli took the reins on womenswear and menswear respectively, but continued to champion Klein's sensual minimalism, dressing Elle Macpherson, Scarlett Johansson, Emma Stone and Jennifer Lawrence along the way. Or is it Raf Simons (now at Prada), who did a much anticipated stint at Calvin Klein from 2016 to 2018 and is known for adding a more subversive-pop element to the brand? The designer explored darkened American themes, adding edge to interesting effect.



After Simons, the brand went on a general hiatus from the catwalk, instead focusing on digital-first campaigns featuring megastars like Shawn Mendes and Kendall Jenner, while it worked out its business model.

This was followed by the appointment of creative director Veronica Leoni in 2024, whose highly anticipated debut took place at New York Fashion Week in February 2025. The question was: could she bring the Calvin Klein magic back?



OPPOSITE:
Kendall Jenner
at the Calvin
Klein Jeans
Music Festival
in Hong Kong,
China, June
2015.

LEFT: Veronica
Leoni at the
Magliano
fashion show,
Milan Menswear
autumn/winter
2025–26 Fashion
Week.

And that just about brings us up to date on nearly 60 years of Calvin Klein – though there have been many more twists and turns in the story along the way.

Calvin Klein is one of those names that sits among the lofty heights of global fashion brands that everyone, both in and outside of the fashion world, knows – such as Dior, Dolce & Gabbana, Giorgio Armani and Vivienne Westwood.

To hear the name is to immediately see the font, the aesthetic, the clothes – and, pertinently, the calm and neutral colour palette (though, as this book will explore, that was perhaps not the case during the Raf Simons era), which underpinned the brand's lifestyle approach to dressing.

Ahead of the New York Fashion Week show in February 2025, the influential fashion consultant Julie Gilhart referred to the return of Calvin Klein Collection – which means what gets shown on the catwalk – under Leoni as being a “BIG day” on social media.

Leoni, an Italian designer who has held positions at Jil Sander, The Row, Moncler and Phoebe Philo's Celine, was the first ever female creative director to take on one of America's biggest fashion brands, with the show taking place at the midtown offices of Calvin Klein. Among those in attendance at the show was the man himself, seen chatting away with Kate Moss and Christy Turlington. He was dressed in a sleek and chic suit, demure and understated just as the Calvin Klein brand had promoted under his own watch.

Notably, Klein hasn't been a part of the brand for over 20 years – since the early 2000s, when Phillips-Van Heusen Corp, or PVH, acquired the business in a deal reportedly worth over \$700m. Clearly, this is a story of several parts: the man, the myth and now, the legacy.

BELOW: Calvin Klein at the Calvin Klein Collection show during New York Fashion Week, February 2025.



In the Beginning

It all began in 1942. Klein was born on November 19, brought up in the Northern part of the Bronx in a Jewish immigrant family with an older brother and a younger sister.

Calvin Klein's father, Leo, was born in Budapest and owned a grocery store in Harlem. His mother, Flore, was a lover of fashion – which must surely have influenced the direction of Klein's career. She had extravagant taste and would wear fur-lined coats. Klein's father, on the other hand, would also teach him about running a business, the importance of customers, and working hard.

When speaking about his mother, Klein has noted that she particularly liked neutral colours – a trait that seems to have rubbed off on him (the Calvin Klein colour palette is one of its unique and defining factors). She was also known to be creative and would often redecorate the family apartment.



Meanwhile, his grandmother, Molly Stern, worked at a dress alteration shop and could apparently make anything, without needing a pattern. She had also worked for Hattie Carnegie, the American sportswear designer. A lynchpin of American fashion history, as we will see, sportswear plays a significant role in the world of Calvin Klein. A picture of early-life influences begins to fall into place.

Klein taught himself how to sketch and sew, and has said that he spent the early years of his life designing in a colour palette of beige, cream and brown – all the colours his mother loved. His grandmother taught him to use a sewing machine, and both women were important references for Klein when it came to the way women looked and dressed. According to *Obsession: The Lives and Times of Calvin Klein*, growing up, Klein himself became something of a trendsetter in his local neighbourhood and, as he got older, would carry a sketch pad around with him.



OPPOSITE: The Bronx by night circa 1946, Fordham Road.

ABOVE: The designer posed with models all wearing Calvin Klein for *Vogue*, photographed by Oliviero Toscani, 1977.