



Eye Style is High Style

By Christine Brophy

Associate Editor

NEW YORK—From leather and wood temples to laser engraved “lens tattoos,” today’s eyewear trends are all about the eye-catching details.

What’s popular now? Crystals, cutouts and laser engravings are prominent this year, say retailers. Colors, especially purples, and two-tone plastics are playing a significant role with the usual basics like blacks, browns and tortoise.

While the visual elements are enticing, technology also carries weight: memory metals, screw-less hinges, spring hinges, lightweight plastic and metal frames like titanium are a top priority for some retailers this year. In addition, unisex styles of the past have given way to masculine men’s styles and feminine, pretty women’s styles.

Even though each optical retailer may cater to a customer base with a different demographic, some things are evident across the board, frame buyers and retailers report to *Vision Monday*. For example, customers are spending money for brand names, comfort and for the functional aspects of the eyewear.

In part, retailers say this is due to an economic turnaround. It’s also partly due to the customer’s priorities towards value and brands.

Other highlights of what leading optical dispensers are observing: teens and young adults are label hungry; women love treating eyewear like an accessory; men are moving into plastics; and boomers are embracing more youthful styles.

Eyewear buyers point to plastics, soft rectangles, and continued strength of rimless

In this special report, retailers around the country divulge what trends are hot in eyewear right now and what they and their customers are focusing on for the 2006.

Color Palette

Eyecare professionals say that deep rich colors are selling strong in ophthalmic styles this year including blues, greens and reds, and earth tones like orangey-brown, as well as tortoise, rich horns, black and brown. Some customers are playing it safe this year, sticking with black, which for some is the “new black.”

Stephen Franklin, chief operating officer at Accurate Optical Co., Inc., in Salisbury, Md., admits that his customers buy more black than any other color, especially his teenage customers. Other retailers note that teens and kids seem to be following the same color palette as adults this year, though pink is still popular with teen girls and chrome and silver for boys.

One color that stands out from the crowd is purple. Several retailers said that different shades of purple were very strong, especially plum. Black and white plastics as well as neutrals such as camel are also doing well, as expected. For men, gun metals and different shades of brown are very popular. “Wearable colors such as wine red,

plum purple, and teal blues that have warm hues or cool tones,” are popular right now, says Gretchen Oldt, associate vice president, corporate merchandising, Empire Vision Centers, Inc. For men, silver and gold frames are still popular, said Oldt. But over the last nine to 15 months, she has noticed that more men are choosing midnight blues, browns, olive greens, gunmetal and matte gun metal.

Michael Minadeo, senior director for ophthalmic and sun frames at Luxortica Retail, says that men are choosing updated plastics in traditional black and brown with color accents on the inside of the frame. “The plastic/metal combination is also popular for men both with contrasting neutral or fashion colored temples such as red,” said Minadeo.

What’s more, innovations in frame materials and manufacturing have allowed for more creative color combinations in plastics for men and women. Double and triple laminates are enhancing frames with layers of luscious color.

ECPs have also noticed that some customers are choosing frame colors for a different reason than the seasonal color trends; for most customers, eyewear choices are driven by finding the right color to accessorize an outfit.

Tempting Temples

Thicker temples, jewelry-like embellish-

ments, wide-tapered multi-colored temples and temples using lightweight frame materials are influencing sales and retail buying decisions this year, buyers say. Temple crystals and stones are huge right now, satisfying the need customers have for “bling.”

Even though frames dazzle with incredible details, all embellishments are not over the top. Embellishments are considered “wearable, elegant, updated and fresh.” Besides baubles and crystals, temple cut outs and laser engravings are evident in many collections. What’s more, temple details aren’t just showing up in women’s collections. Even men have a lot to look forward to this year. Leather and wood temples are rising in popularity and sales.

For some though, the technological features are driving sales. Oldt says that Empire Vision Centers are heavily focusing on memory metal and technology categories such as the EZ Lock system patented by Viva, which has no screw for the hinge. Lightweight metals and spring hinges are also desirable because they enhance comfort. Durable materials such as titanium add value for the customer while also satisfying some men’s need for a minimalist look.

Plastics are also becoming more mainstream for men in both semi-rimless and rimless styles, said Robin Genden, owner of Bayview Optometrics in Mashpee, Mass.

Weighing the Options

When customers choose glasses, one thing they definitely consider is comfort.

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Spring '06 Consumer Eyewear Messages

Optical Frames Share Sun's Spotlight

By Marge Axelrad

Editorial Director

NEW YORK — They are very visible.

They are presenting the category as an accessory in a new fashion.

This spring, more than ever before, ophthalmic frames are being glamorized and glowing in the spotlight of consumer marketing messages.

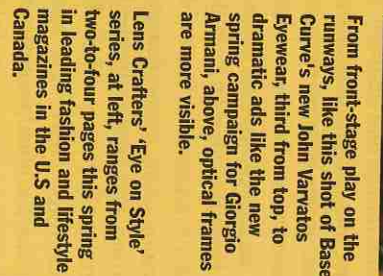
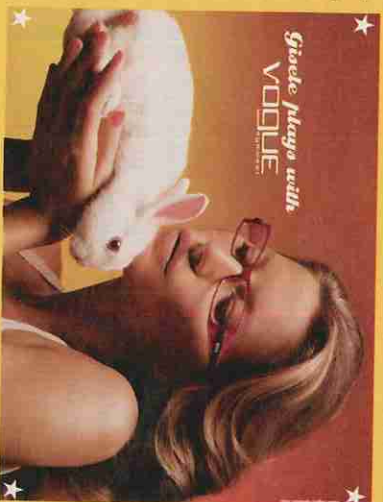
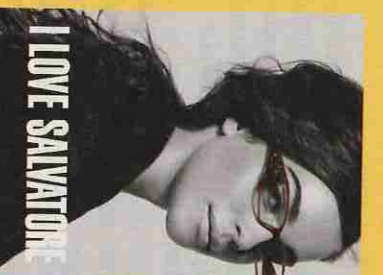
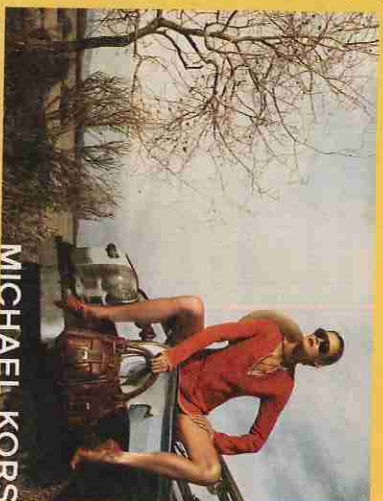
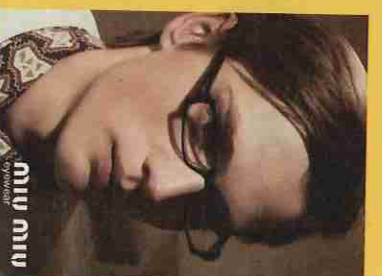
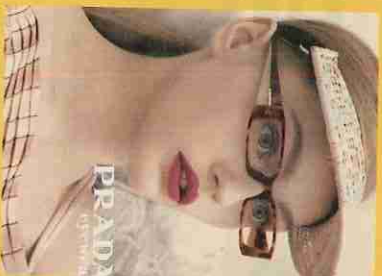
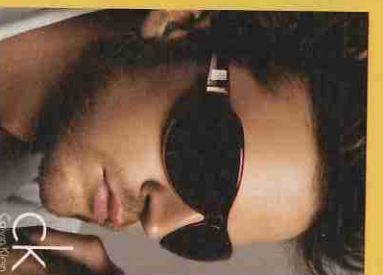
Optical frames shared time on the fashion runways of New York, Paris and Milan collections with sunwear styles. And, in this spring's consumer campaigns, ads and images in some of the most prominent consumer style, fashion and culture publications are going beyond traditional sunwear messages to feature frames that are made to hold prescription lenses.

Eyewear companies note that their designers are more convinced about optical's fashion potential than in the recent past. And that optical's presence in the style pages is another step in glasses' progress from the background to front-and-center, a trend that can be reinforced by ECPs and optical retailers everywhere.

On the retail side, Luxottica Retail's LensCrafters' group has generated a lot of attention for its new spring "Eye on Style" series which has been running in four-page or two-page versions in an extensive campaign. The ads feature different combinations of a musician, the actress, a ballerina and the film producer/publisher in mini-profiles that talk about their approach to life and their eyewear style.

Greg Lechner, LensCrafters' vice president of marketing, told Vision Monday: "LensCrafters already has a strong reputation for one-hour delivery, convenience, wide selection and great customer service. With this series of ads, LensCrafters is taking the next step in building brand awareness among consumers who also value personalized style and fashion as well as top name designer name frames."

The Eye on Style series has been running in spring issues of Vogue, People, the New York Times' Style/Fashion section, Vanity Fair, Harper's Bazaar, GW and Men's Journal among others. The ads are also running in Canada in such publications as Dolce Vita, ELLE Canada, Fashion and Femme.



From front-stage play on the runways, like this shot of Base Curve's new John Varvatos Eyewear, third from top, to dramatic ads like the new spring campaign for Giorgio Armani, above, optical frames are more visible.

Lens Crafters' "Eye on Style" series, at left, ranges from two-to-four pages this spring in leading fashion and lifestyle magazines in the U.S. and Canada.

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Bulky and heavy glasses are hard to go back to for some customers who've experimented with rimless or titanium styles, said Mello Thompson, marketing director at Image Optical in Nashville, Tenn. To cater to her customers' needs, she tries to buy frames that are as light

as possible or around 2.5 grams. She will look for lightweight frames in every style, from plastics to titanium. "After buying one pair of lightweight frames, people tend to buy more," said Thompson. But, "not every frame is lightweight," she added, "so it is a challenge."

Lenses and Frame Fronts
Lenses are also advancing in unexpected ways. Customers are buying more laser-engraved lenses, also called lens tattoos. "The trend just started and people want it," says Thompson. Just like a tattoo can add art to the body, customers can now decorate and per-

sonalize their glasses with customized laser engravings.

Technologically, lenses are advancing every day too. Progressives are giving boomers additional options while boosting retail sales. "Technology in the last three months has changed dramatically.

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New shapes, intricate engravings, the rise of plastic and techno-inspired designs are changing the look of modern eyewear. Some leading designer experts speak out...

color. Most important is that the frame front color be neutral and wearable while the temple designs and colors can be bolder and more expressive. Look to the side for all the action on a frame.

"Trends drive the industry and create more sales. It is always a good thing when styles get shaken up and customers look for something truly new and refreshing. Bigger shapes in sunwear and decorative details using color and laser carvings seem to be the transition from the stones-only trend in women's eyewear and sunwear."



Sheila Vance, CEO and designer, Sama Eyewear
"Most importantly, in terms of frame features, we're going to

see a strong return to gender-specific styles, with very feminine and masculine elements. For example, with our Badgley Mischka collection, you will see Swarovski crystals, pearls and feathers for women, and for men, shiny silver detail and laminate woods—masculine classic elements.

"Textiles are very important because eyewear can carry a look. For example, we've just introduced houndstooth frames and have taken a very famous textile pattern and applied it to eyewear. We are going to continue doing that with other patterns as well, because they are both timeless and elegant. Textiles will expand the market in the coming years.

"The young, spirited eyewear consumer is definitely more daring when it comes to color, or volume, which is in fact clearly demonstrated by the strong plastic trend...by its intrinsic nature, plastic has more surface and more volume...and even in metal, milled frames are getting more attention today.

"Men are much more comfortable with color. We see it in our Calvin Klein optical collection. Orange is also [popular] with the guys; we see it in sweaters, sweatshirts, and clothing also.

"Another thing I've noticed is the return of gold. There was a period of silver, but now we will move back into gold, from logo plaques to buttons.

"This year, for us, the rectangular shape has been strong in Europe and is starting in the U.S. It is a look that fits a lot of faces. It's almost a universal shape and it gives a decent field of vision.

"Another trend just emerging is vintage. In terms of '70s styling. [We're seeing it] in the size and shape and color of the lenses."



Chris Shyer, president, Zyloware
"I continue to see unique ways of putting wearable colors on the outside of frames in different textures but using exciting new col-

EMBRACE COLOR



David Duralde, Vice President, creative direction, Kenmark

"Fashion houses and designers are interpreting patterns and motifs from other categories such as ready-to-wear, home products and jewelry and bringing them to the temples. We see bright colors and decorative details that reflect the designer's style appearing to brand the product with a distinctive touch.

"Combinations of metal fronts and bold plastic temples remain strong. Spring hinges that are more discrete and integrated—such as those from OBE—are very popular and add comfort without interpreting the design.

"Don't be afraid [of color] because the customer is certainly not afraid of

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[Optical retailers] need to know about the lenses. It is a reason to buy the glasses. Study up on them and know what is out there," says Thompson.

Another trend retailers note is that the ophthalmic eye shapes are getting bigger and bigger in softer rounds and rectangular square shapes.

Oidt says that the deeper B (or vertical) measurement of ophthalmic lenses is expanding, but not as large as the sunglasses. She notes the gradual rise of ophthalmic lens measurements to 32 to 36 B compared with previous measurements of 26 to 28 B ophthalmic.

"Non-prescription wraparound fronts are also huge," says Genden of Bayview Optometrics. She says that she is planning to buy more sunwear wrap styles this year.

Eyeshapes

In terms of eyeshape, butterfly and geometric shapes are ruling, as well as sharp and soft angle rectangles. With sunglasses,

it is less about the eyeshape and more about the size, which is big, big, big! And, while not an emerging trend, some of the colored lens tints are still doing well, retailers say.

Rimless styles are selling strong—partly for their light weight and partly for the minimalist look it creates. It was also noted that kids—wanting to mimic younger adults—are embracing semi-rimless styles. "Now that semi-rimless and rectangle shapes are available in junior sizes, we're starting to sell more of those styles to older kids," says Luxotica Retail's Minadeo.

Consumer Spending

This year, retailers across the board were pleased to announce that customers are spending more on their frames. Depending on the demographic, styles were ranging from \$125 to \$600 for frames alone.

"Patients are spending more money today than in recent months. The econo-

my seems to be rebounding nicely, and that has helped patients return to the marketplace," says Franklin of Accurate Optical. Franklin added that people are willing to pay a little more for a frame if they also get exceptional customer service. Accurate Optical stores also provide an unconditional warranty for almost all of the frames they sell, which adds on value too.

Genden's Cape Cod Bayview Optometrics store draws a mix of customers from businessmen to artists who are also dropping good money on specs. "They are putting very expensive lenses into these frames and want a pair of glasses that reflects that," says Genden. Customers typically spend \$400 for frames (not including the prescription). Her lowest Rx sale is \$250 to \$300. But, some customers spend upwards of \$500 or higher.

Customers are also buying multiple pairs of eyewear at one time or buying contact lenses to go with their eyewear purchase. This can include an accessory reader, glasses for day wear, glasses for

night wear, and even just a fun pair. Marching eyeglasses to meet different lifestyle needs was a recurrent theme with these retailers.

One group of customers that retailers are catering to more is boomers. "Money follows the boomers," said Thompson. "As long as they don't have kids in college, they have a lot of money to spend on eyewear."

Brand Appeal

Retailers are mixed in their views about whether or not customers stick to a certain brand or manufacturer or if they tend to move around. Some retailers find that customers choose the brand that is the hottest that moment. Other say that the particular style of the frame is the deciding factor. Many retailers agree though that regardless of the brand, frame fit, comfort and style are usually top deciding factors for shoppers.

"If they feel like they look good, they

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ors with layering and sculpturing and laminating so that the product feels richer.

"Spring hinges continue to be very popular for men. There have been improvements on spring hinges [so that frames] look sleeker and are more lightweight.

"[Optical retailers] should pay a lot more attention to brands with wearability and longevity beyond simply what's new. Brands with an established and successful track record should be taken more seriously than something hot for the next three minutes. [Retailers should] focus on keeping significant sellable and core products and not just replacing something they sold with something that is brand new."

TRANSLATIONS FROM FASHION PEOPLE AND PLACES

Jean Scott, VP of product, Luxottica



"In both sun and ophthalmic there is a marriage of materials. There are lots of combinations—metal fronts with plastic temples, plastic fronts with metal temples. It's a marriage of materials stemming from what we see happening in fashion and on celebrities in terms of clothing, [such as mixing] a pair of denim jeans and a Chanel blazer. This is how it is being translated into eyewear.

"The color palette or color family that is strongest is purple-based hues from mauve to a rich eggplant. In addition to those kinds of colors, you will see colorations that are deep—not bright—but deep, rich reds, blues.

"I also see the strengthening of trends—split temples, split metal and plastic temples. That trend is continuing for spring.

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will buy it," said Helene Goldschmidt, owner, Frame Up Eyewear in Snyder, N.Y. "People look at you every day and the first thing they see is your glasses." She added, "I don't feel that people buy for price at all. We carry all high-end glasses and customers are not afraid to spend the money."

Retailers hint that logos and other embellishments—while still evident—are not as bold as in previous years. Men, however, tend to be a little more discrete. One retailer, Valerie Vitru, owner of Margot Camille Optique in Philadelphia, notes that her clientele (which is 70 percent male), prefer discreet or undetectable logos in expensive brands. For men, she notes, ophthalmic

"Designers feed off culture and celebrities. Designers are also very influenced by what is happening in their own world. The best example of that is what we see coming out of Donatella Versace for spring, summer and fall. It's heavily influenced by her life. Her colors are heavily based on tones of the desert Southwest where she spent quite a bit of time: sunset colors, oranges, red brown, earth-rich tones from the red-based clays to the blues of the sky.

"For Boomers, 50 is the new 35. There are a couple different generations that are looking to fashion for the same types of looks and designs. Designers are really using a lot of creativity to come up with spectacular pieces to appeal to someone who is a boomer and someone in his or her early 30s."

DESIGN 'COLLISION' OF SUN AND OPTICAL

Leslie Muller, design director, Marchon Eyewear, U.S.



"Optical and sun used to be two different continents. Now they are colliding and crossing over into each other. The sun sales can be equally as strong as optical for the same brand.

"I came from a sun background where trends [appeared] faster. Optical had a lot of restrictions. Starting about three or four years ago there was a big shift. Part of it was when Silhouette introduced its Titan frame—hinge-less, the pinnacle of a non-frame with little jewelry, little diamonds suspended from a nylon cord. [From there it] just started to grow in scale.

"Five years ago 85 percent of frames

styles from lines like Alain Mikli or Mykia are doing well.

In sunwear, Vitru sees the reverse trend—logos are prominent.

For kids and young adults between 15 and 25, brand names are especially popular because it is a way for them to incorporate a brand into their wardrobe that they can't afford yet in apparel.

For this same reason, designer frames also have a mass appeal. "For a style-driven customer, eyewear is one of the least expensive designer items they can add to their accessories," said Minadeo.

However, "The label has to have the right price and value to it for the consumer to be attracted to it," says Oldt of Empire Vision Centers. If it's the right

were metals. Now it's the reverse. At least 65 percent are zyls. Zyls have treatments, laminations, carved bamboo, crock patterns. Laminations still dominate.

"We've moved into more unusual eye-shapes and, in fact, it's hard to name these shapes! Some consumers are sawyer, and their eye is trained for more hybrid, sophisticated eye shapes...it's a subtle shift, where it's almond, rather than oval, rectangular with a softer or upswept edge, rectangular with a twist."

RICH COLOR AND THE RETURN OF HAVANA

Timm Parker, director of product development, Safilo USA



"Colors for 2006 will

be warmer, clearer and brighter with a considerable influence on earth tone and tonal looks in complex neutral colors for the luxury brands. While color still plays a role, the palette is more neutral than in the past season. A very strong comeback for the colors for the fall 2006 will be the Havana and Ivory combined with shades of natural horn as well as the richest tonality of blue (lapis, teal, aqua), violet, and green (malachite, emerald, avocado).

"The marketplace has currently saturated with many different technologies. This year, we have released our improved version of the compression mount system as well as memory metal materials. We have a dedicated team of engineers that develop and constantly improve the functionality of hinges

"Consumers are constantly looking for

brand with the right style and the right embellishments, they don't mind spending the money, she adds.

The Future of Frames

Getting customers to think differently about their eyewear is also helping retailers move more pairs. "Thinking beyond function is one primary goal.

"Ophthalmic frames are going to be the fashion accessory of tomorrow," said Vitru. She also said that she has even seen this trend in boomers (who don't want glasses that add age), as well as a growing style awareness among men. Men have bought plano ophthalmic frames (including doctors and lawyers) to pair with a good suit for a job inter-

the thinnest lenses available in the market. High index lenses have the benefits of being considerably thinner and lighter even in a strong prescription. Progressive lenses have been more shallow over the years giving the consumer the possibility to wear smaller and trendier frames."

FINE ENGRAVINGS AND MORE SOPHISTICATION

Blake Kuwahara, creative director, Rem Eyewear



"Just as in apparel and accessories fashion,

we're still seeing strong influences from the '70s and '80s—in some cases, the bigger the better. We're moving away, however, from bright and bold colors to a more wearable palette of richer and deeper colorations. As more classical looks are making their way on the runway, we will see a trend towards more classical colors and tortoiseshells.

"Embellishments with stones and studs are still important accents, but the recent runway shows and the decline in the Boho look to more lady-like fashion is forcing eyewear to be a bit more subtle and sophisticated. It's not about the more stones the better and "out-blinging" the last design, but using these embellishments in a sophisticated and meaningful way.

"With better technology, we have been able to use lasers to do finer and finer engraving work. Intricate detailing can now be achieved which can give a temple added dimension and an almost sculptural quality.

We have used lasers to achieve men's textile patterns. Herringbone, glen plaid and hounds tooth patterns engraved onto temples mirror the strong influence of men's textiles in women's fashion this season."

view or to shape their professional appearance, acknowledged Vitru.

"We are happy to see customers shop for style and brands. We want to see the entire eyewear category grow as people embrace eyewear as an accessory," says Minadeo of Luxottica Retail.

Buy the looks of it, it's all ready happening. It's clear to see that frames are not just a necessity for those visually challenged. Ophthalmic frames are emerging as a trendy and versatile accessory option for all men and women of all ages. Just like shoes, customers of the future will have several pairs to meet an occasion, enhance an outfit or freshen up an old look. ■