

# Rags to Riches

by Silvia Bombardini



Supreme SS19, Porcelain Cupid Figurine

There is a poignancy to Supreme's Cupid Figurine, that is besides the flush on its cheeks, its polished chubby limbs, the rose-tipped plumes of its wings. Skewering an arrow through the human heart it holds in its left hand, this porcelain child-god of desire in a box logo tee, so fresh and so savage, stands as a counterintuitive token of the lost love of class divide. Made by Meissen, a prestigious porcelain manufacturer established in 1710 in the eponymous German town, and painted by hand, the statuette was last resold, according to stockx.com data, for £6,107 as I write. Supreme's SS19 Cupid wryly marks what we've for some time seen coming, though it had yet to be as outspokenly stated: streetwear's reluctant, resentful divorce from its founding fathers, its socio-cultural roots. Thought it is first and foremost a matter of price, it isn't solely about that either – street culture wasn't always the product of hardship that those who used to look down on it now romanticise it as. But neither was it ever as familiar to polite society as it has come to be today, as a costly china cherub dressed up in the world's most famous streetwear staple embodies and mocks. For example,

**Stone Island jackets and Burberry caps have never been cheap, yet it wasn't all that long ago – in the mid-00s – that British pub chains would refuse entrance to those who wore them, because of these two brands' unfortunate association with the chav subculture: football hooligans and troublemakers who had taken them up as part of their uniform. But fashion has since grown fond of this particular breed of authenticity, and in the cannibalistic subsumption that the industry is known for, restoring Burberry's and Stone Island's reputations in the process, it diluted the threat streetwear once posed to civic order.**

Like most things in late capitalism, authenticity too is now for sale. It might have resisted initially, but capitulated at last, perhaps grudgingly to unswerving demand. Nothing could have made it more obvious than Supreme selling a 50 percent stake in its business to The Carlyle Group, for \$500 million in late 2017 – a move that turned James Jebbia's label into the first streetwear unicorn, a startup valued at one billion dollars. But authenticity is also in short supply – it sells out quickly, which makes it precious. No wonder that spending power rallies around it. Like all things for sale, authenticity is sold to those who don't have enough of it yet, and to the highest bidder amongst them first. Unlike the outlier his style refers back to, the contemporary streetwear consumer is a reliable and well-positioned member of society, comfortable enough to splurge. As much as chavs weren't for Burberry, so-called hypebeasts might not be the audience that the labels they pledge alliance to had envisioned for themselves at first – that is, as much as any brand wouldn't envision commercial success. Supreme for one, is notoriously unsympathetic towards its fan base. Back in 2016, when the skateboarding brand put out a branded brick for sale, it prompted Highsnobiety to describe Supreme's relationship with its customers as sadomasochistic.



Burberry baseball cap, SS19

Still it didn't take a 6K winged deity to open our eyes: it is tacit but common knowledge that streetwear is the code of status of our generation, a language whose pictographs – the swoosh, the tri-ferg, the quotation marks – are globally understood as signifiers of specific steps on the ladder of wealth. Of course, conspicuous consumption in menswear is nothing new, and snapbacks and tracksuits and trainers and tees are only now where once were top hats and waistcoats and breeches and canes. Occasionally, the knowledge of it may be less than tacit too. Take, for instance, The North Face puffer jackets, a must-have piece of adoptive streetwear – in the sense that they were not born as streetwear but have become so, by affiliation. The Business of Fashion reports that over the past few years in South Korea, they have come to be colloquially referred to as 'spine breakers', after the burden their high price puts on the financial backbone of the families who feel pressured to concede, and buy their kids expensive outerwear to keep up with their peers. In 2014, K-pop band BTS released a song criticising this phenomenon titled *Spine Breaker* – its lyrics translate to "*padded jacket worth a couple thousand*" and "*your padded jacket, your greed fills it up*" plus more variations on the theme.

But what's peculiar about streetwear as a status symbol, how it differs, or did, from the status symbols that preceded it, from delicate, had-crafted porcelain idols, is that it has climbed up that ladder precisely by virtue of its appearing to be at the bottom of it. It is expensive not despite but because it looks cheap: authentic streetwear belongs to the artistic tradition of social realism. It appeals to those who perch at the top, the less likely to slide, Zuckerberg-s in non-descriptive zip-up hoodies. On them, the message behind streetwear's standardized designs shifts: they declare that the wearer needs not flaunting his wealth, and flaunt it in so doing. In an interview about his brand and workday with Mr Porter published under the headline of '*Fear Of God: Luxury Streetwear For The A-List*' founder Jerry Lorenzo sums it up this way: "*luxury is being able to wear cut-off sweatpants and inside-out T-shirts every day*". The oxymoron of luxury streetwear has now become ubiquitous, yet dressing up as dressing down is a prerogative of the rich. It is what Kanye West baptised in a tweet this time last year as 'Grocery story drip Erewhon drip laundry day drip airport drip', to caption the picture of someone in a windbreaker and loose grey sweats, socks and a single blue slide of his own design. It is true: people in Los Angeles pop down to Erewhon, an upmarket organic grocer, in yoga pants and sleep clothes. Their sleep clothes just happen to be Yeezus tour merch.

This kind of flexing is inaccessible to most, no less to the subcultures that the style fetishizes. When Supreme collaborated with Louis Vuitton on the luxury brand's fall 2017 menswear collection, which famously featured a skate deck retailing for £54,500, some New York skaters interviewed by WWD deemed it 'a betrayal', and the press agreed. "*Nothing is more lethal to cred than a sellout*" wrote Guy Trebay for The New York Times, "*it was the fashion version of a murder-suicide*". If it didn't turn out to be quite as deadly as that for Supreme, nor Louis Vuitton for that matter, it would be tough to prove that the skateboarding brand's clientele hasn't changed since. But the onslaught of luxury streetwear has ramifications reaching further in the long run than the disappointment of the skate community. In early 2018, news broke of a new measure for fighting crime that was being introduced in Rotterdam, Netherlands, which would allow for the local police to stop and question young people in the streets if they wore expensive clothes, and confiscate these if the wearers couldn't provide

evidence of how they had been able to afford them. Though brand names weren't specified, it isn't difficult to image these expensive clothes to be luxury streetwear, a style now being literally stripped away from the street to be placed on high fashion's podium. Again, and whether or not Supreme might have been at fault in its decision to team up with Louis Vuitton at the time, this isn't always reflective of designers' intentions quite as much as of the rule of the market. In a much-quoted interview with The Telegraph, Vetements' Demna Gvasalia himself once said that his own friends are often unable to afford his clothes, and that he too can think of better ways to spend that much.



Supreme X Stone Island, SS19

So who are the hypebeasts who buy streetwear today? Wealthy, surely, second generation for the most part, but millennials first and foremost. The old-school suit is still a status symbol for some: their parents keep wearing it as the donned getup of corporate success, and that is still how most manual workers nowadays perceive it. But the suit suits younger generations less and less – in 2019, it's casual Friday all week long. Those who came of age in privilege, but in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash, see in buttoned-up tailoring and tie less of a safety net and more of a uniform, a lasting echo of the surpassed values of traditionalism and subservience. Once a derogative term for a guy in overalls to privately address the supervisor whose hands were always clean, now 'a suit', as a pejorative, is someone who follows the flock, plays by the book – a white-collar worker as much as the one who insults him, but not audacious, not a techie. One doesn't move fast and break things in a suit, it is done in streetwear. Not unlike the shirt on his back, the old disdain of the worker for those above him is recycled by today's entrepreneur to identify the group he aims to leave behind. Yet looks aside, many streetwear consumers today approach their chosen brands in precisely the same way stock traders and brokers would an investment. Which is to say that they buy – cop – in order to resell at a high markup price

online. At the height of the Bitcoin boom, comparisons were even drawn between cryptocurrency and the streetwear trade. *'Bitcoin Millionaires Are Coming for Streetwear'* claimed GQ, and the profiles of investors in either field seemed eerily aligned: teenage, male, plugged in and aloof, effortlessly handling big sums. More so than aligned, they were often the same people, for whom one interest had led into the other, into something that was designed as disruptive, in fashion or finance, but once absorbed by the mainstream turned out to be following the same guidelines as that which it had supposedly surged up against.

When it isn't marketed as luxury streetwear, streetwear isn't always expensive to begin with. But with the pretence of accessibility that a reasonable price tag affords, often justified by mediocre quality, non-luxury streetwear can still be a positional good. Because when it is cheap, streetwear is scarce. Its value rises by there being so little of it: and via the all-peculiar marketing strategy of the drop, a streetwear brand's profits can skyrocket still. A drop is the frequent, usually weekly, release of limited-edition new products which normalised the odd sighting of hundreds of kids patiently queuing outside Supreme stores on Thursday mornings at dawn, even when they're routinely left unsatisfied. The drop is how streetwear appropriates luxury's restricted flow whilst keeping its prices popular, a reverse but parallel process to how luxury appropriates streetwear's stylistic accessibility. The latter happens when luxury brands adapt their forms towards those of streetwear, but also when they lower quality and price tags into what Eugene Rabkin thinks of as *"premium mediocre fashion"*, the widespread diffusion of superlogo baseball hats, overpriced card holders and keychains yet not as pricey as proper luxury garments would be. As streetwear hedges closer to luxury, luxury hedges closer to streetwear. The result is the hybrid that defines menswear in our time, driven forth by collaborations between ever narrowing poles, a stasis that it's hard to move away from or propose an alternative to.

In theory, this could have all turned out very differently. A softening of class differences, at least aesthetically, might once have had the potential to upset hierarchies. What happened here though is the opposite: young millionaires wearing their investments on their sleeves as they buy authenticity off the street, while local subcultures are being asked to undress. Sooner or later, those subcultures will be forced to accept streetwear as lost and come up with something else to put on. It is only there and then, perhaps, before co-optation, that the menswear of the future will begin.