

FASHION

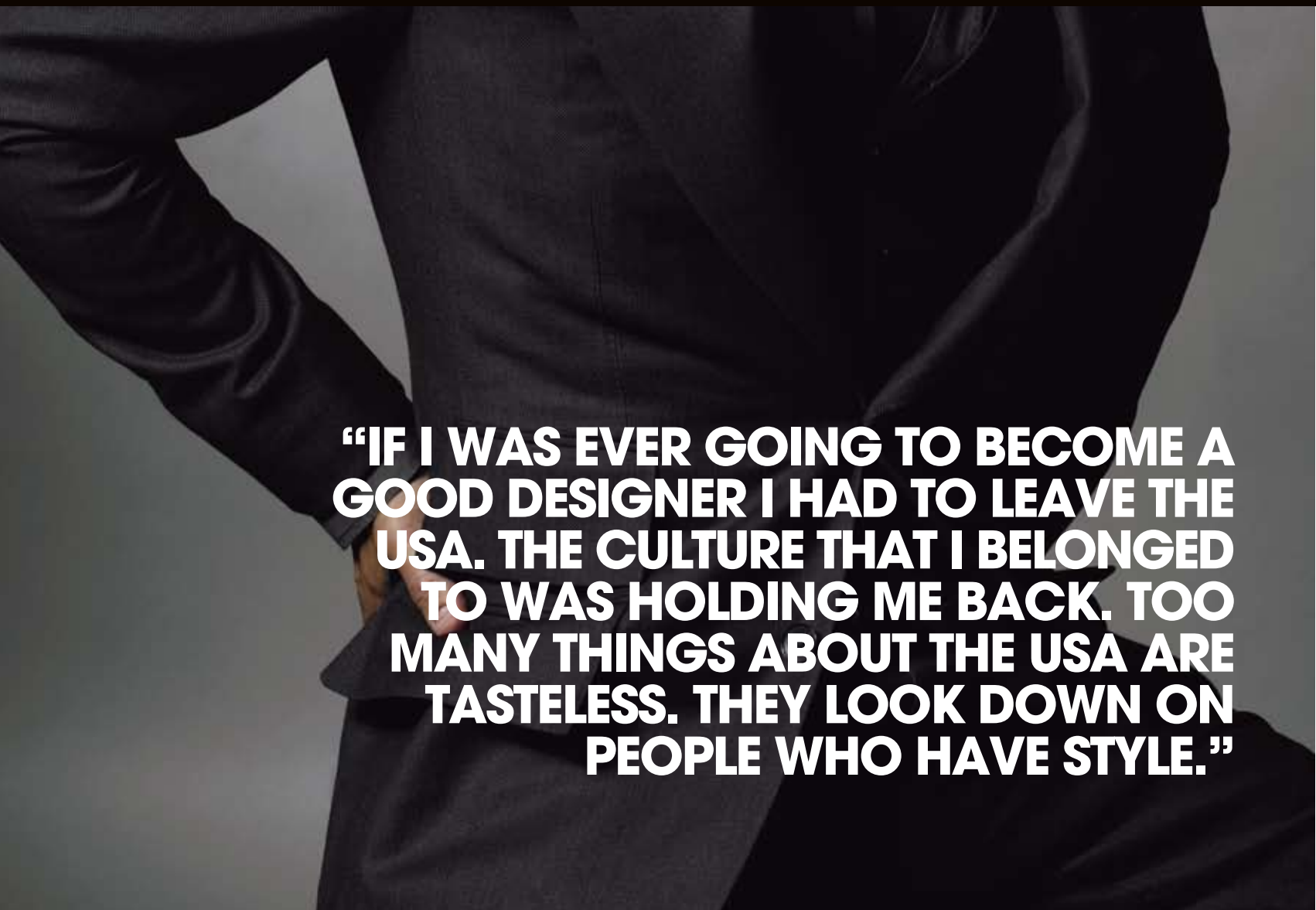
TFORD

One of the world's foremost fashion designers is now also a successful film director. With his debut *A Single Man*, Tom Ford has shown that it's possible to have several glamorous careers in one lifetime. *Plaza* meets the bull from Texas, who is now being compared to Wong Kar-Wai.

BY JOHN WERICH
PHOTO SØLVE SUNDSBØ



Tom Ford directs Colin Firth, who plays George in *A Single Man*. Several scenes in the film are inspired by Ford's life. Like the suicide scene, for example.



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Tom Ford is the bull from Texas who enjoyed a meteoric career as a fashion designer in Milan and Paris, built his own empire in the US – and then became a film director. Was the film world a bit sceptical about *A Single Man*, Ford's directorial debut about a suicidal gentleman in 1960s California? You bet it was. But after his debut opened in Venice all the doubters fell silent.

It turns out that Ford's stylish and assured sensualism translated wonderfully to the silver screen. His visual style had critics comparing him to Chinese film genius Wong Kar-Wai. “The way Charley's pink-and-gold parlor harmonizes not just with her sweeping monochrome dress but also her pink Sobranie cigarettes will evoke swoons of delight in auds for whom magazines like *Wallpaper* and *Architectural Digest* are holy writ”, wrote Leslie Felperin in film magazine *Variety*.

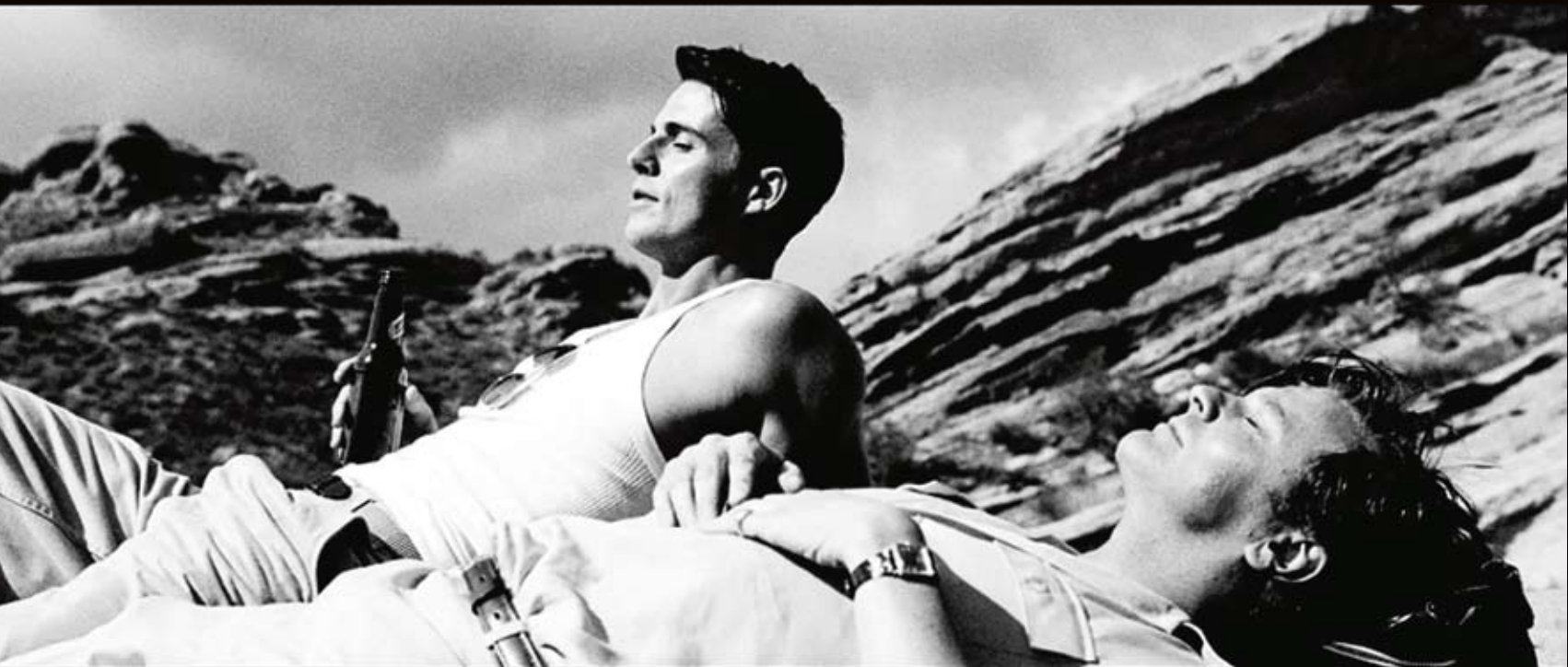
Thomas Carlyle Ford has come a long way from Santa Fé, New Mexico, where he was born 48 years ago. In 2004, when Ford and his colleague Domenico De Sole left the Gucci Group to relocate to the US, they had conquered two fashion metropolises and historic fashion houses – Gucci in Milan and YSL in Paris. Gucci's transformation is still Ford's best known achievement in fashion. During his first five years as head designer at Gucci the fashion house went from being a dusty old family company

that couldn't afford copying paper to a powerhouse with a turnover of over 4.3 billion euros.

Ford arrived at Gucci, then leading a languishing life with internal conflicts and family feuds, in 1990 via a warm recommendation from his boyfriend, *Vogue Homme* editor Richard Buckley. Ford's life has been full of people who have crossed his path and helped him on his way. The first was his mother Shirley, a southern belle with a passion for clothes who is said to have bought Gucci loafers for her son when he was twelve. His trajectory to the pinnacle of the fashion world started when a 17-year-old Ford moved to New York to study art history. In New York he found his place in the city's nightclubs, not least the legendary Studio 54. It was here that he realised his sexual orientation – and got to know Andy Warhol and Marc Jacobs. The latter helped him to land a design job at Perry Ellis. He stayed for two years but soon grew tired.

– If I was ever going to become a good designer I had to leave the US. The culture that I belonged to was holding me back. Too many things about the US are tasteless. They look down on people who have style. Europeans, on the other hand, appreciate style, he says.

Ford's career at Gucci is without precedent, as is the fashion house's total comeback. Thanks to figure-hugging silhouettes, plunging necklines and glamorous disco references Gucci became



Left: Matthew Goode and Colin Firth as Jim and George, the lovers in *A Single Man*. Tom Ford designed the clothes for the male leads himself. Above: Divorcee Charlie (Julianne Moore) refuses to accept that her childhood friend George is gay.

Italy's biggest fashion house, with a bit of help from Carine Roitfeld, now editor at *Vogue Paris*, and Mario Testino. The style created by the trio was soon copied by fashion houses all over the world.

The genius of Ford's design philosophy is that he never really creates anything new. He simply has a unique feel for plucking something out of the past and recreating it – with a twist – creating a recognition factor in customers. This is especially true of the classic tailored men's clothes, perfumes and sunglasses that he designs for his own label. Now he has recycled a part of history again – his film takes place in the mid 1960s, a period that reflects Ford's penchant for glamour. Since Ford left Gucci his design has gone from daring, eye-catching sexiness – which reinvented Gucci and made Ford an icon – to a more sensual, classic sexiness.

This more sober sexiness can now be seen in his men's clothes, sunglasses and heavy perfumes that call to mind the elegant decadence of the 1960s, when men wore suits, women wore their hair up and cocktail hour was more important than breakfast.

– At the moment sexiness has given way to sensuality. Everything works in cycles, but because we are human creatures and because sex is one of our fundamental urges sexiness will never go out of fashion, he says.

A Single Man is the film version of Christopher Isherwood's book. When it came out in 1964 it was considered shocking, with its honest, touching portrayal of a middle-aged homosexual man. The drama takes place during a single day in southern California. University teacher George is struggling to find meaning in his life after his long-term partner Jim has suddenly passed away.

Several scenes are said to be lifted from Ford's own life, like the one where George and Jim fight about who will take the dog for a walk – and the suicide scene. In previous interviews Ford has revealed that a member of his family killed himself in the same way – in a sleeping bag, so as not to make a mess.

– After the first screening in Venice we got a ten-minute standing ovation, and it felt so fantastic. It was very emotional for me to see how the film spoke to other people. I couldn't be happier about the way it's been received. It doesn't matter how much you love something, there are always times when you doubt whether others will see it the same way, he says.

Have you always longed to make a film, or did you want to film this particular book?

– Film has always fascinated me. It's enduring. The idea is to create an entire world, not just a dress or an item of clothing that exists for a short period of time. A film is the ultimate design project. You can decide whether people live or die, what they say, how they say it, what the rooms look like, how people are dressed, what happens, the atmosphere. And it's encapsulated in that world forever.

– Naturally I devoted a lot of thought to what my first project would be. I read *A Single Man* by Christopher Isherwood for the first time in the early 1980s, and was touched by the story's honesty and simplicity. I was 20 then. Three years ago, when I was searching for the right project for my first film, it occurred to me how often I thought about that book and its protagonist, George. I decided to read it again. Now that I was approach-

ing fifty the book had a completely different resonance, and I realised that this was the film that I had to make.

What was it that made you decide to move into filmmaking?

– I've always wanted to make films. When I left Gucci in 2004 it seemed like the perfect opportunity. Directing felt natural to me. I'm used to framing an image. In fashion your job is to create a vision and then convey that vision with the help of your colleagues. Directing was similar to that, and I had a fantastic group of people to work with.

Isherwood dedicated the book to fellow writer Gore Vidal. Have you ever talked to him about the book and the film?

– Christopher Isherwood is no longer alive of course. But I spent a lot of time with Don Bachardy, Christopher's long-term boyfriend and the trustee of his estate, and he is very happy with the film.

You have said that you had already decided who would play George when you met Colin Firth, and that you instantly realised that you had to choose him instead. Why?

– Colin Firth was my absolute first choice. First he was busy with another film, but then our production was delayed a bit, so suddenly he was available. The instant I heard that he was available I called him and sent the script over. The next day I flew over to London and had dinner with him. I managed to persuade him and the same night we shook hands on it. I went back to Los Angeles and was in preproduction two weeks later.

– Colin is a fantastic actor and has an amazing ability to portray what he's thinking just by using his eyes, almost without moving his face and without saying a word. I knew right from the start that he would be perfect to play George. ▽

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Colin Firth and Tom Ford during the shoot. Rumour has it that Ford tried, and succeeded, to get his film star to lose weight.



From Tom Ford's signature collection.

You believe that this isn't a gay film, even though it's about a homosexual couple.

– I think that Christopher Isherwood was ahead of his time. One of the things that I love about his books is the way he portrays homosexuality. The majority of his books are autobiographical so naturally they usually have a homosexual protagonist, but that isn't the core of the story. The homosexual character is portrayed as a human being living a life. The same applies to the relationship between George and Jim. I think that it was important to portray them in the "right" way – that they were simply two people who loved each other. I wanted it to be a human story. I think that if we saw love between two people for what it is, love between two people, everything would be so much simpler.

Do you have any plans for a new film?

– I think I have to get through this one first and then figure out what to do next. I'd like to make a film every two or three years. I would love to have a parallel career alongside my fashion work.

What inspires you?

– Everything inspires me equally: life, and what I want. When I start a collection I look at my wardrobe and ask myself what kind of suit I want, and if I still want to wear a suit. Then I start creating based around that. I look at the things that I don't want to see any more, because they bore me, and then I think about the new ones. We have to practise in order to renew ourselves.

How is your label received in the US compared to Europe?

– I think that now, more than ever, the world is a very small place. Our customers are very international and travel a lot. So they are similar in all of our stores all over the world.

You and your partner Richard Buckley have homes in London, Los Angeles and Santa Fé. With so many places to stay, where do you call home?

– Richard and I have two fox terriers that go everywhere with us. I've always said that home is where the dogs are.

In previous interviews Ford has expressed his desire to start a family and have kids, which his boyfriend is said to be set against. When I inquire about this he answers amiably but firmly:

– I've learned this: that if we do decide to have kids, then the press is that last place I would ever discuss it!

Have you always had a keen interest in architecture?

– I studied architecture when I decided to change tack and study fashion instead. I'm very fortunate to be able to build lots of houses and stores and work with the architects who I admire, like Tado Ando. He has just designed our house at our ranch in Santa Fé. I do all the fun stuff, and then I leave them to do the calculations and construction.

Ford's great interest in architecture manifested itself at an early age when he had Gucci's shops redesigned. His choice of dark woods, thick carpets and subdued lighting became characteristic for his style, which can also be found in an updated version in the new Tom Ford shops. Warmer woods, gold instead of silver and brown instead of black make for a softer, cosier feel.

– My houses are decorated like the Tom Ford stores because the label is very much an expression of my personal taste. I also have private works of art in most of our stores, and furniture from my homes. ©