

# The Clerkenwell Post

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FREE

## RISQUÉ BUSINESS

*How Agent Provocateur changed  
the lingerie game forever*



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# AGENTS OF DESIRE

*The UK's sexiest lingerie company has its HQ in &C1. With Valentine's Day coming up, Yvonne Courtney takes a peek behind Agent Provocateur's mysterious looking black door on Clerkenwell Road and examines the secrets behind its success...*

If Playboy changed attitudes regarding sex, Agent Provocateur has played a major role in ushering in an age of daring and taste-changing lingerie. Twenty years ago, everyone bought their knickers at M&S... until Agent Provocateur came along and changed the lingerie landscape forever. Founded in 1994 by Joe Corre, son of Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren, and his then wife Serena Rees, Agent Provocateur became a symbol of a slightly decadent and mischievous London lifestyle.

After Corre and Rees divorced and the brand was sold to private equity firm 3i, Agent Provocateur moved its HQ to Clerkenwell. You would expect its offices to be as dramatic as its boutiques, and you wouldn't be disappointed. Behind the mysterious black door on Clerkenwell Road is a workplace featuring plenty of black and candy pink, shiny surfaces and furniture classics from the likes of Etra, Kartell and Vitra. There are lace-patterned carpets and walls adorned with blown-up images of scantily clad models.

"Realising just how complicated underwear is was a big shock," Corre once told *The Independent*. "If you want 50 suits made, it's not hard to find a tailor to make them. But if you want 50 bras, in 20 different sizes... in a colour that isn't black or white... making fashion underwear is really bloody hard. But where there's a will, there's a way." A crash course in the constructive detailing of ladies undergarments and media mayhem duly followed.

"It hasn't been that hard to design sexy, rather than tacky," Corre added, "but then I think sometimes tacky can be sexy - it's about the fit and quality." This

attention to detail is essentially what's kept Agent Provocateur ahead of the pack of high-street imitators. It has remained a dedicated specialist, making collections in a comprehensive range of sizes.

With Corre and Rees no longer involved in the brand, the person responsible for Agent Provocateur's hyper-sexy designs is now creative director Sarah Shotton, who has been with Agent Provocateur since its early days. After studying fashion at London's Central Saint Martins college, she began her career as an apprentice in 1999 and was appointed creative director in 2010. "I've grown with the company," says Shotton. "I used to be involved in pretty much every aspect of the business but as it got bigger I had to let some things go. I now oversee everything creative so I have a say in everything from windows to packaging, campaigns and even our perfumes."

"It's by women for women," says Agent Provocateur's CEO Gary Hogarth of the brand. "When Shotton took over, she created designs to make women feel confident, sexy and comfortable rather than concentrating on what bitches fancy."

Shotton draws inspiration from femme fatales and 50s pin-ups, sometimes spending up to a year perfecting a collection. Challenging the technical boundaries of lingerie, she uses fabrics in non-traditional ways, to create dramatic shapes for maximum impact, developed to flatter, entice and empower. Her personality shines through the collections, which are seductive and luxurious with a hint of naughtiness - such as the Ohh Err Mr range, with its fun postcard print, which was one of the first cup-sized bikinis.

With 54 stores worldwide, and ambitious expansion plans from its new owners, Agent Provocateur now encompasses lingerie, swimwear, hosiery, homewares, beauty and accessories. 2012 figures revealed profits of £4.1m on sales of £31.4m (an increase of 18% year on year). Its performance comes at a time when the UK's £2bn lingerie industry is in a state of flux with mass market retailers La Senza and M&S scrambling to revive flagging sales. Yet despite offering a relatively

niche product, Agent Provocateur is still at the top of its game. Later in 2013 it is set to launch a diffusion line, L'Agent, in collaboration with Spain's sexiest sisters, actress Penelope Cruz and her sister, Monica. Believing there is a major gap in the market for a more affordable, high quality range, it anticipates that L'Agent could become bigger than the rest of Agent Provocateur's business in volume terms within five years. Agent Provocateur's bottom line looks distinctly rosy.

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