

HORN-RIMMED GLASSES FROM THE EIFEL



Snobbishness or simply good taste? In the Eifel, one of the poorest peripheral regions in Germany, the last glasses in the world to be made from genuine horn are hand-produced. The distinguishing features: they look good, have a different feel when worn, age well and are available at prices commencing at around 1,000 euros.

Located on a small road in the Eifel village of B., halfway between Hillesheim and Daun, the company premises are wholly unprepossessing: a single-storey, white building with functional industrial windows. About as spectacular as a sack of cement. But here is the twist: in this nondescript utility building the most exclusive spectacles in Germany are manufactured, by hand, and from horn. From here they make their way to a dozen of the most expensive stores, from Zurich, Hamburg and Berlin to the Millionaires' mecca of Palm Beach, Florida and a tiny, highly-exclusive and expensive spectacle store on New York's fashionable Park Avenue. This could almost be the plot of a television series.

The ground floor workshop offers working space for eleven employees, the air is filled with the hum of polishers, the creaking of presses, the gurgling of vacuums keeping air and lungs free from the tiniest grains of horn dust. Other than this, a concentrated silence. Because producing glasses by hand as individual items requires the utmost concentration. Simplified and in brief, the procedure is as follows: horn (of all different types) is cut open, soaked to soften, flattened, pressed into a small sheet at 80 Bar pressure and cut into a spectacles form marked out with a stylus before being polished and receiving the addition of the arms. Finished.

As stated above, this is an extremely simplified version of events. We have omitted

mention of the myriad of additional steps required in the procedure. We have not spoken of the inserts of textile or wood between the layers of horn that permit a range of colour effects and schemes (including the red and white design of an evening gown repeated in the spectacle frames, to say nothing of the shoes). We neglected to mention the approximately 250 individual steps required for each pair of glasses, that the majority of the presses, milling machines and saws have been developed specifically for the task at hand. After all: these items are no longer manufactured elsewhere. Similarly rare are the spectacle makers themselves, because the vocation has not been taught since the 1970s. The consequence: in B the craftsmen are trained at the company itself. A process of approximately 2 years. Minimum.

And we have said nothing of the enormous breadth of knowledge required in the handling of a sensitive natural material such as horn. Let us put it this way:

In Europe – and perhaps worldwide – there are precisely three companies producing genuine horn-rimmed spectacles. Here in B. this results in an output of some 50 pairs per week (the figure for synthetic frames, which tumble out of the fully-automated machines, stands at 3,000 to 4,000 pairs per day). And this is the ludicrous side to the situation: even synthetic frames bearing the most expensive brand names and designer details pour out of machines such as this in similarly high quantities.

A pair of hand-made horn-rimmed glasses, in contrast, is always unique. Each pair of spectacles is slightly different. And this is to omit the fact that polished natural horn has a completely different appearance to

polished synthetic material. And there is obviously a different feel, too, the sensation on the bridge of the nose is different to glasses from material that is also used in the production of buckets and shower trays. Plastic.

"This is the same difference as that between a cashmere pullover and one made from synthetic fibres," says Dieter W., founder and proprietor of the Hornline company, with a total of 35 years of horn-rimmed spectacle experience under his belt. His glasses are not cheap, obviously. No wonder, with such a manufacturing process. These are minor investments, because genuine horn-rimmed spectacles will last an eternity. Simply send them in every few years to be refurbished (this is possible at this company!) and you are ready for the next decade. The shapes? Nothing trendy by any means! The colours? Primarily grey, beige and brown tones. The brand? "Hornline" is inscribed on the arms. Or, at the most "We engrave the name or telephone number of the purchaser," says Dieter W. Nothing else is added to the spectacles. After all, the customers wish to wear attractive glasses and not attractive names.

P.S. And then there were two important responses. Firstly, Dieter W's. spectacles cost upwards of 1,000 euros at specialist retailers, in America – and particularly on the west coast, i.e. Hollywood, a bit more. And secondly: how can I tell whether the glasses I have in front of me are genuine horn-rims? Answer: by looking at the arms. With glasses made from synthetic materials a thin metal strip is "fired" into the arm throughout almost the entire length. Without this, in contrast to horn, they would never keep their shape.

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